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THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.

MAGAZINE

NAPOLEON SOLO · ILLYA KURYAKIN

MARCH, 1967

VOL. 3, NO. 2

NEW FULL LENGTH U.N.C.L.E. NOVEL

THE HUNGRY WORLD AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

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Born of madness, nurtured by hate, THRUSH had found the ultimate threat to put the world in its power. Fighting against time, Solo and Illya seek to find the mad despot who has in his hands the key to a dreadful secret—which, once released, spells doom! 2 to 66



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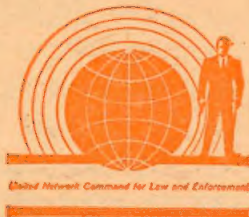
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THE HUNGRY WORLD AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

Napoleon Solo looked at the one man who had an outside chance to save them. "THRUSH has hurled its last challenge. We win—or the world as we know it dies. We—and all decent mankind. All but THRUSH!"



PROLOGUE

THE BIG HEAVY black limousine snarled along the narrow and dangerous cobblestone road that wound through the hills above Athens.

The day was beautiful. The sun shone with a mellow warmth that it seems to reserve only for Greece. In the far distances the thin-masted fishing boats were like toys pushing across the sparkling water of the Aegean.

As the road wound back upon itself, the ruins of the Acropolis slid into view. On the broad pla-

teau, the ancient Acropolis still seemed to dominate the modern city sprinkled below with its motor-cars, trams, and television antennae. The time-eaten fluted columns, temples, and stadia were reminders that today's civilization was but a flowering from roots laid in antiquity.

But the ruins of the Acropolis held no interest, philosophical or otherwise, for the four men in the hurtling limousine. The man beside the driver rode with his mouth a gash, his shoulders straining for-

STARRING

NAPOLEON SOLO and ILLYA KURYAKIN



ward as if to add to the dizzying speed.

His voice ripped into the air-conditioned, soundproofed, silent interior of the car: "Hurry, you fool! That swine of a defector might have contacted U.N.C.L.E. hours ago. Quit making like a Sun-

day driver—or we'll walk into a swarm of enemy agents when we reach Doulou's place!"

Eyes hard and knuckles white on the wheel, the driver depressed the accelerator another fraction of an inch. The speedometer needle crept a few kilometers higher. The

whine of the engine began to insinuate even into the interior of the luxurious, specially-built THRUSH vehicle.

A grove of stunted olive trees flashed past. Beyond, a curve loomed emptily, without a rail to guard the sheer hundred foot drop down a face of stone.

With a touch worthy of the Grand Prix, the driver came into the curve low, balancing the combined forces of gravity, centrifugal force, and traction. The car swept up and out. The rim of the road yawned. Emptiness sucked a the black juggernaut.

But the driver was coaxing the wheel, touching the accelerator. The car seemed to flatten and stretch out, staying with the road as a surfboard controlled by an expert masters a murderous wave.

And then, just as it cleared the curve, the car squatted, tires screaming and smoking.

Up ahead, a gnarled goatherd was prodding his flock across the narrow road toward the meadows in the vales above.

As the car slewed to a rocking, dust-billowing stop, the man beside the driver touched a button. The window slid down, opening so quickly it seemed to have vanished. The thrush agent thrust his head out.

"Clear the way, old man! Get those filthy vermin off the road!"

Bouncing about on bandy legs, the goatherd was busy soothing

those of his charges which had been startled by the sudden appearance of the car.

The THRUSH agent spat an oath, deflected a button which flipped the bulletproof car door open, and hurled himself out.

He was a big fellow, with a square, swarthy face, a bull neck, and crinkled black hair. Ethnically, he might have been native to the area.

But the man's clothing was like nothing the goatherd had ever seen before. From ankles to neck and wrists, the THRUSH man's ox-like physique was swathed in a tight-fitting garment that gave the appearance of having been knitted from dull silver.

The suit was a new THRUSH issue, already given the vernacular dubbing of "hot togs" by agents of the supra-government. With the agent protected by an insulating inner liner, the suit conducted and amplified energy from its own mini-powerpack. If turned to full amplitude, the suit transformed its wearer into a weapon no less deadly than a naked high tension coil.

As the goatherd stared, the THRUSH man surged into the midst of the flock, lanclets of sunlight bouncing off him.

The silvery man flipped a tab on his right shoulder, activating the suit with the barest minimum power. Each time he brushed against a goat, blue sparks crackled. The animals twitched, bleated, charged

pellmell from the road, rushing blindly from the crackle of lightning in their midst.

Cloven hooves clawed up the shallow cliffs, hurtled past the monstrous black car, dashed themselves over the precipice.

With a shriek, the goatherd led the rout. He clawed his way up the face of shade, dashed full tilt into a hemlock that grew on the hillside beyond. The blow knocked him to the ground, where he lay with his hands covering his face.

With the milling roadblock instantly removed, the THRUSH agent leaped into the black limousine as it pulled abreast of him.

With a relishing smile for the havoc he'd wrought, the agent settled into the seat as the limousine roared ahead.

"These hot togs are really most effective. Turned to full power, they'd make any character who touched you think he'd sat down in the electric chair—not that he'd have time to think!"

The man in the far corner of the rear seat stirred for the first time. "You sound as if you had doubts."

"Doubts?" A note of caution came into the THRUSH man's voice.

"That anything devised by THRUSH would be perfect."

The agent stared hard through the windshield at the uncoiling road ahead. "I have no doubts whatever, my commander. I was merely so excited by the possibili-

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ties of the new hot togs that I was eager to try them out. If I'd turned the power a little higher, I could have fried those goats on the spot."

"It is your job to wear and use the suit, not to test it." The voice from the back seat was cold with the suggestion that the small question mark had just been dropped into the agent's record.

The man in the front seat worried his knuckles together. "I did not mean—"

"I know what you meant. It was not wise of you to say it. But time is important and you did clear the road in the quickest manner possible. We'll leave it there for now."

The man in the back seat leaned forward out of the shadows. Unlike his companions, he was not dressed in the hot togs. He wore neat slacks and a dark turtle-neck sweater.

He was young, compactly and wirily built, and as he peered from the window, sunlight struck his face. It was, in a manner of speaking, the echo of a face all too familiar to many THRUSH agents. A young, square-jawed face with

a wide forehead and a cleft in the chin. A face capped by light hair cut with careless bangs.

At a quick and superficial glance, the face might have passed for that of Illya Kuryakin. But anyone who knew the topflight U.N.C.L.E. agent intimately would have detected a stranger. Illya's face did not have this merciless aura. His eyes did not hold this fire of cruelty and half-mad lust for power.

Dion Gould raised a slender hand to flick the bangs from his rounded forehead. The fires leaped higher in his eyes.

"The private roadway to the villa is just ahead. I see no sign of activity. We have beaten U.N.C.L.E. here. Soon we will have beaten them all the way."

TWO

UP THE sunny, pleasant, verdant hillside beyond the villa to which the THRUSH mastermind had referred, Dr. Marko Doulou restlessly prowled one of his greenhouses. He was a short, rotund, pink man with chin whiskers and a bald head that peeled continuously, like onionskin, from over-exposure to sunlight.

All about Dr. Doulou, in troughs of soil of every color and composition, were strands of wheat from all the major varieties.

Dogging the doctor's heels was his assistant, a young bespectacled

man clothed in a white lab smock that matched Doulou's.

The assistant stood with clipboard cradled in his left forearm, pencil poised in his right hand.

But the master scientist did not break his moody silence. In the further end of the long greenhouse was a glass case that measured, at its base, about six by twelve feet. Its top was slightly higher than the roly-poly doctor's head.

Doulou came to rest on his stocky legs before the case. A sigh formed heavily on his lips.

In contrast to the stands of healthy wheat throughout the greenhouse, the grain inside the glass case was pitifully stunted and barren.

Doulou slid a glass panel open, reached inside the case, and plucked a withered stalk. It snapped brittily between his fingers, turned to dust. He shook the powdery remains from his fingers, closed the case with a slow movement of disappointment.

Then, as he turned to his assistant, Dr. Doulou's inability to accept defeat asserted itself. His shoulders squared beneath the white smock. His lips tipped up at the corners, and the barest twinkle returned to his eyes.

"At least we know how not to make healthy grain!"

The assistant nodded, letting the clipboard hang at his side.

Fingering his lower lip in thought, Doulou paced the narrow

aisles between the greenhouse tanks. Now and then he paused to peer at a stand of wheat, to finger the grain.

"So much stalk and useless chaff to get an edible kernel of grain," he mused. His gaze strayed to the glass case, where the most important experiment of his long and distinguished scientific career had backfired.

His eyes were eloquent. He was thinking of the spectre of hunger as the world's population explosion reached new heights each day; of the critical need to increase the yield of arable land; of his scientific and humanitarian dream that had turned to withered stalk and dust inside the glass case.

"Exactly in reverse, eh, Theodosius?" he murmured to his assistant. "We set out to treble, even quadruple to yield of every single stalk of food grain that shall grow on our planet—to fill the granaries of the earth!"

He passed his hand over his eyes. "We discovered the Doulou Particle. It destroyed the grain. But it shall not destroy our hope!"

Doulou began to beat his fist in his palm as he paced back and forth like a caged pink bear. "Where did we make our mistake? In our calculations relating to the chromosomal patterns? Or does there lurk within the Doulou Particle yet another, unknown to us at present, subatomic particle that can—"

A sharp humming sound interrupted Doulou. His head jerked. "We have visitors." A frown creased his brow as he started from the greenhouse. "Perhaps it is that man from U.N.C.L.E., Theodosius, to stifle us with all the trappings of security measures!"

He flung up his hands as he entered the spacious Grecian villa. "How can they expect me to work with a counter spy hanging over my shoulder!"

Doulou crossed a solarium, where a marble nymph splashed water into an indoor fountain. Columns supported the glass-dome roof high overhead. Potted tropical foliage flung a riot of color against the far wall.

Doulou mounted a short, wide marble stairway to a vaulted entrance hall. He was met there by a manservant.

"A Mr. Kuryakin has arrived, sir," the butler said. "I've shown him to the library, as you instructed."

"Yes. Hmmm. U.N.C.L.E. just now advised us by radiogram to expect their man. Must say they got him here with miraculous speed."

Moving with amazing agility on his stumpy legs as he talked, Dr. Doulou had crossed to the library, opened the door.

Filled with diffused indirect lighting, the room was a quiet sanctuary—dark walnut-paneled walls, floor-to-ceiling draperies, massive

walnut and leather furnishings, and thousands of volumes on every subject showing their spines in the book shelves.

Close behind Doulou, Theodosius shut the massive door, turned, and bumped into the doctor.

Doulou had drawn up short, a frown on his face.

"Going to a costume ball?" he said with wry humor, his glance taking in the dull silver knitting worn by two of the men before him.

The third man, young, fair-haired, clothed more conventionally, stepped forward. "I'm Illya Kuryakin, Dr. Doulou. You knew I was coming, of course."

"Yes. Well," the little doctor grumped, "did you have to bring these fellows along in their fancy tights?"

"My assistants," the young man said.

The newcomers drifted forward to ring in the scientist. He looked at the eyes of the man who had announced himself as Kuryakin. Unaccountably, a tiny alarm bell tinkled in the back of his mind. He didn't like to be encircled. He had the sensation that they were a human noose, drawing tight about him.

Doulou's tongue touched his lips. "May I see your credentials, Mr. Kuryakin?"

"Of course." The young man smiled. But he made no move to show a pocket folio of identification. Instead, he lifted a hand to

rub the back of his neck, his eyes hard on Doulou.

"Dr. Marko Doulou, famed agronomist. Scientific specialist in grains. Discoverer of the Doulou Particle. Primary research indicated that radiation of seed with the Doulou Particle would affect the chromosomatic structure and multiply the yield of edible grains, rice, wheat, barley, oats.

"Instead, you made one of those minute miscalculations somewhere that in science so often have totally unexpected results. In actual experiment, the Doulou Particle had exactly the opposite of the desired result. Grain radiated with the Doulou Particle yields a husk holding a kernel that is little more than dust!"

Doulou took a step back. His throat had become dry. The eyes about him were coldly ferocious, not the eyes of friends.

He took a breath to steady himself. He knew Illya Kuryakin by sight. Although they had never met formally, he had once attended a scientific conclave where the legendary U.N.C.L.E. agent had been present as an observer.

This young man *looked* like Kuryakin. But Doulou had the dread certainty that it wasn't he. No. The eyes, they were different. At the scientific meeting, with Kuryakin some distance away on the opposite side of the large banquet table, Doulou had discreetly studied the young international agent.

The doctor's motive had been simple curiosity. He'd been intrigued by the thought of a life so danger-filled and fast paced, so different from his own cloistered, sedentary existence. He fully intended to seek out the interesting young man for an informal chat, but the agenda had been too crowded with meetings.

"Who are you?" Doulou's whisper was husky.

"Illya Kuryakin," the man said with a mocking smile.

"No. You resemble him—enough so that I could walk into your trap. But you're not he!"

The young man's face settled into its own aspect of ferocity, of chilling arrogance that surpassed mere egomania.

"As you say, doctor, the resemblance has achieved its purpose. Now be wise. Permit us to complete our business and go."

Doulou took out a handkerchief and mopped his face. His eyes darted. He was ringed in. If only Theodosius would dash for the door, raise the alarm—

"Business?" he said. His voice was a croak. He was a stranger to violence or the threat of it. And the threat was a fog graying this once-secure room. But in the quagmire of his fright, Dr. Marko Doulou made a discovery about himself. There was some hitherto unknown steel in his guts. He didn't like the idea of these men walking in and pushing him around.



"Theodosius," he said thickly, "go and tell the butler to bring my heart medicine."

Doulou's heart was as sound as flint. Both he and Theodosius knew it.

Mentally, the doctor prayed that his assistant would be able to employ the ruse to get out of the room.

Theodosius made no move. Instead, he added his laughter to that which burst suddenly from the three intruders.

Doulou looked at the surrounding faces, his eye blanking with consternation.

The agent who'd posed as Kuryakin choked back his glee, wiped his eyes, and looked past the doctor at Theodosius.

"You have the formula for the Doulou Particle?"

"Of course," the assistant said.

Theodosius slipped a thin sheaf of folded papers from beneath his smock. He started to hand the pa-

pers to the bogus Kuryakin, and Doulou experienced the urge to mayhem for the first time in his long, quiet life.

"Theodosius!" Doulou was trembling hard from the effort to hold himself in check. "You—One of them? Who are they? Why do you betray the trust—?"

Theodosius looked different, as if a mask had been lifted from his face. "I am tired of being a shadow, a nothing, a two-bit lackey at your beck and call. When they contacted me, I welcomed the opportunity. THRUSH will rule the world—and I shall rule a scientific complex that will make your efforts look like the futile bumbling of a Middle-Ages alchemist!"

"You fool!" Doulou said hoarsely. "Don't you know they're merely using you as long as it suits their needs?"

Doulou instantly saw the deepening of contempt in his assistant's face. His words had no effect. Instead, secretly envying and hating his superior for a long time, Theodosius enjoyed hearing the despair in Doulou's voice.

"With this, you have given us the world." Theodosius shook the formula almost in Doulou's face. "So who is the fool?"

Doulou blindly hurled himself at his traitorous assistant. The unexpected collision brought a grunt of surprise from Theodosius. Off-balance, he tripped. Doulou fell with him in a thrashing tangle.

Theodosius was much younger, stronger, more agile. But Doulou was half crazy from a heartbreaking sense of betrayal. He felt the jolt of Theodosius's fist in his face as the assistant writhed free. As the younger man swung a second blow, Doulou grabbed his wrist, clawed for the throat with his other hand.

Distantly, the doctor heard the phony Kuryakin giving orders: "Careful! Stand back. Let Theodosius handle him. But watch for intruders—with the hot togs ready!"

Theodosius had scrambled to his feet, drawing back a foot to aim a vicious kick at Doulou's head. Halfway to his knees, the doctor glimpsed the blow as it came. He jerked his head aside. The foot struck his shoulder, slamming him backward.

Doulou saw Theodosius's contorted face towering far above him. Again, the assistant raised his foot, this time intending to smash it down as if upon an insect.

As the gleaming black shoe descended, Doulou grabbed, twisted. With a squeal of surprise and pain, Theodosius twisted, fell. Strength waning, Doulou clawed his way to the writhing form. He reached, grabbed his assistant's smock, tried to drag him down as Theodosius struggled to his feet.

Clinging to Theodosius, Doulou took a smashing blow in the mouth, another on the forehead. He was

blacking out, sagging, falling away from Theodosius.

The assistant swung a roundhouse right at Doulou. At the same instant, Doulou's knees crumpled. The wild blow missed its target entirely. The aftermath was inevitable. Without an object to intercept his expenditure of force, Theodosius stumbled. Off-balance, he thrust out a hand at the nearest support, which was one of the THRUSH men wearing hot togs.

Before the THRUSH agent had a chance to move, Theodosius touched the silvery knit suit.

Instantly, his fingers were welded to the material. A blue glow encompassed his body. A single nightmarish scream was wrenched from him. He jerked in a wild spasm to his tiptoes, back arched, eyes jutting, lips peeled far back from his clenched teeth. He did a weird, convulsive caricature of a dance on his toes as the voltage poured through him.

Safe in the encasement of the insulated interlining of the suit, the THRUSH man reached to his shoulder and pressed on the tab. Theodosius crumpled at his feet, a limp mass of blue-tinged flesh.

The stench of scorched human blood and meat was already pervading the room. Dion Gould, resembling Kuryakin now in only a few superficial physical details, was stuffing the sheaf of papers bearing the formula for the Doulou Particle under his turtleneck.

He nudged the remains of Theodosius with his toe in passing.

"Stupid pig!"

Doulou heard their footsteps gliding away. He pushed himself up, braced with his hands. Theodosius lay a few feet away before his eyes. Doulou gagged, jerked his eyes away, and willed himself to get to his feet.

He didn't understand fully the purpose of the men who'd been here and taken the formula, but he knew it was evil.

THRUSH . . .

They were connected with the organization, and they considered the formula worth a daring and bold gamble.

Doulou felt fresh air on his face and realized he had made it to the broad, iron-railed terrace of the villa.

"Stop!" he yelled feebly.

On the driveway below the three THRUSH men who'd invaded the villa were getting into a heavy black limousine which a fourth agent had keep running.

Reaching out a hand as if in that manner he could grasp and drag them back, Dr. Doulou stumbled spread-legged down the broad terrace steps.

The car was in motion, rocketing out of sight where the shrub-bordered driveway formed a curve.

Doulou pitched to his knees, sagging in the driveway. Then his ears caught the intermittent whistle of a helicopter's rotating blades.

The slashing shadow cut the corner of his vision.

He jerked his head up, looked skyward. A silver 'copter was settling on the broad expanse of lawn a hundred yards away.

Doulou pushed to his feet. His smock had been ripped half off of him in his fray with Theodosius. It streamed about him as he pumped his pudgy legs toward the 'copter.

The vehicle, bumped, settled, as Doulou stumbled forward beneath the slip-stream of the slowing rotor blades. He saw the side hatch in the crystal bubble open.

A man was springing out. A young, compact, wiry man with fair hair, square jaw and slightly cleft chin.

Illya Kuryakin, Dr. Doulou thought.

This time for real. But too late.

ACT ONE

THE WAY TO A MAN'S SOUL

ILLYA KURYAKIN instantly assessed Dr. Doulou's disheveled condition. As Doulou stumbled, Illya sprang forward and caught him under the armpits.

"I take it that THRUSH has already paid a visit," Illya said. "Did they get what they came after?"

"Yes. My assistant, they got to him, made a traitor of him."

"They're always on the lookout for an Achilles heel. Or any kind of heel they can turn to their pur-

poses," Illya said grimly. "But the details can hold. Right now we've got to get that formula back, and quickly."

Doulou pulled himself together. His feet firmed and steadied beneath him. "The formula was my creation, my responsibility. In the wrong hands it could be used to plunge the world into acute starvation. So if that windmill will carry double, let's quit wasting time! They left in a black limousine, the kind that doesn't travel the mountain road every day, or even every month."

Doulou clambered into the 'copter as Illya Kuryakin slid beneath the controls. Kuryakin applied power and the idling rotors became a blur in the sunlight.

As the 'copter swooped into the sky, the ageless beauty of the Grecian countryside unfolded. Stone-and-thatch farmers' huts nestled against green hillsides. Flocks of grazing sheep were like puffs of cotton in the distant meadows. Awesome cliffs of sheer stone cleaved the landscape with blue shadows lying over the valleys far below.

Illya heeled the 'copter in the direction of the narrow, twisting road that joined the main highway just outside of Athens. Hawk-eyed for any telltale trace of a speeding black limousine, he listened to Doulou recount the harrowing scene in the library.

While overshadowed by the theft

of the formula, two other details hit Illya with shock force.

Grudgingly, he had to admit the evil efficiency of THRUSH in the development of the hot togs. Obviously, the lethal garments could be worn beneath street clothing, concealed. Which meant that merely to touch a THRUSH agent might mean certain death.

The second detail was the physical resemblance of the commanding agent to Kuryakin himself.

"Simplified his problem," Illya said.

"To use the vernacular of the Americans," Doulou nodded, "it made it duck soup for the spider to walk into the parlor of the hapless fly. I knew you by sight—"

"Which is why I was chosen for the particular contact."

Doulou grabbed the chrome handrail beside the seat as the 'copter slipped and pitched in the thermal current swooping up from the cliffs. "I was certain the caller was you."

"Which makes it slightly personal," Illya said through his teeth. "I can't appreciate such people doing impressions of me."

"What will be their next move, Mr. Kuryakin?"

"We haven't the whole picture yet. A THRUSH agent pulled a bit of a goof in an assignment, realized it would mark him for extermination. He made tracks while he still had time, knowing we were his only hope. He offered us information

as to THRUSH's next move in exchange for asylum."

"And that move was to the formula for the Doulou Particle."

"Bingo, Doctor. The formula was triple-A priority. I was the U.N.C.L.E. agent nearest you, just across the Dardanelles in Turkey. The information was relayed to me. I jetted from Ankara to Athens, where the 'copter had been reserved via cablegram."

With a sudden motion, Doulou latched his fingers on Illya's right forearm.

"Mr. Kuryakin!"

"Yes, Doctor. I see the car."

As the 'copter had crested a jagged upthrust of ageless volcanic stone, the black car had flashed into view. It was almost directly below, a shiny ebon bug slithering around the curves at suicidal speed.

Doulou gulped as Kuryakin heeled the 'copter and let the bottom fall out of the sky.

The vehicle inched lower, pacing the car, the rotor blades almost snipping the towering rise of sheer rock that the road hugged.

From the abyss that skirted the outer edge of the road thermals toyed with the 'copter, bouncing it up and down like the flicking of invisible giant fingers.

Doulou simply had to close his eyes for a moment to shut out the dizzying sight of the cliff and road twitching and flicking at them.

When he ventured a fresh look, Doulou saw that Kuryakin was still

sticking close to the car like a flipping kite on the end of an invisible string.

"Mr. Kuryakin . . ."

"Yes?" Illya didn't look at him. Every nerve and muscle of the U.N.C.L.E. agent was devoted to the tricky job.

Doulou studied the nerveless determination of the young face beside him. Then the doctor hardened his shoulders, forced a breath into his lungs. "Nothing, Mr. Kuryakin. Except to say that I'm delighted to ride shotgun, even if I lose my stomach!"

"Quite," Illya said.

The 'copter was an annoying giant hornet. It forced the car to swerve, slither. A curve loomed ahead. The limousine, refusing to slow down, skidded through the bend almost broadside.

The 'copter had dipped briefly into the abyss. But it returned as the car rocketed down a short straight stretch.

Kuryakin jockeyed the craft in front of the car, letting the skids drop toward the glowering chrome grillwork.

An arm suddenly thrust from the car. An arm clad in silvery knitting. Almost instantly, a heavy caliber slug jolted from an extended weapon.

The projectile grazed the crystal bubble just above Dr. Doulou's head. The impact was slight, but enough to trigger the explosive. A shower of crystal needles hurled in-

to the cockpit. Doulou's hoarse cry mingled with the roaring rush of wind.

Illya Kuryakin shot the 'copter up like an express elevator. He looked quickly at the scientist. Doulou had thrown his hands against his face. A smear of blood was seeping from a cut on his pate.

"Dr. Doulou!"

Doulou cracked his fingers, peeped out, patted his cheeks, temples, the top of his head. He looked at the red stickiness on his fingertips.

His face was gray, but he smiled.

"A sliver merely caught me in an invulnerable spot, Mr. Kuryakin." He patted the abrasion on his scalp with a handkerchief.

Illya's shoulders relaxed. "We have proven our point."

"Point?"

"It's the limousine we're after. We've ruled out the remote chance of innocent people being in the car."

"And now?"

"Now we turn on the traffic light, Doctor."

Under Illya's touch, the 'copter had swooped beyond the brow of a stony ridge, taking cover. Keeping the road out of sight for the moment, he reached into the small leather kit wedged beside his seat.

He took out a lump of puttylike material a little larger than a golf-ball.

"Plastique, Doctor."

"Explosive. I see."

"How's your throwing arm?"
Illya asked.

"I'm not exactly a Boog Powell."

"He's a first baseman, Doctor, not a pitcher. But you don't have to approximate a Drysdale for this job. Just pitch on signal. Can you do that?"

The rotund little man's eyes glinted as if he'd just realized how drab his years shut up in a lab had been. "The pleasure will be mine, Mr. Kuryakin!"

Illya passed the explosive to Doulou, and mosquitoed the 'copter back over a route that overlooked the road.

Below and ahead, the limousine was roaring across a long, level plateau. Beyond, almost in sight of the men in the car, the road entered the last series of sweeping turns that would take it to the Athens highway and safety.

Above the howl of wind through the shattered cockpit bubble, Illya said, "It's now or never, Doctor. But I won't ask you to risk your life against those explosive bullets, if you care to decline."

"It's your life too, Mr. Kuryakin. As for me, I'm ready."

The shadow of the 'copter raced across the speeding car. Doulou was twisted in his seat, arm up-raised.

"Now, Doctor!"

A split second after he had spoken, Illya was wheeling the 'copter up and away.

He poised on a needlepoint in



the sky and watched gravel and macadam mushroom before the nose of the limousine. The car seemed to rear on its rear wheels for the barest moment. Then it was dropping its nose into the smoking crater. The rear end came up and over.

The smashed top emitted a streamer of sparks as it slithered at an angle on the macadam.

Striking the shoulder, the car flipped and came to rest, miraculously, right side up. Illya was already dropping the 'copter. The skids struck a sandy, graveled area near the road with a jar. He and Doulou got out and started racing toward the shattered, smoking limousine.

The quiet of the day was broken by the hiss of water from broken radiator connections and the final creaks of tortured, twisted metal.

Pistol in hand as he leaped the ditch near the car, Illya said, "Watch it, Doctor. One of them still seems to be alive."

His assessment was correct.

When the car had upended, the driver's neck had been broken. He lay in a heap behind the wheel. A THRUSH man in back was a sickening sight with a shattered skull.

Mashed against the rear floor of the car, his broken legs at odd angles beneath him, a third silver-clothed agent was groaning to blurred consciousness.

Peering into the wreckage of the car, Illya said, "Three of them, Doctor! All wearing hot togs. Where is the fourth man? My double? Where is the man who got the formula?"

A croaking laugh came from the car. The THRUSH agent was dying, easing his final moments with the savor of evil victory.

"Beyond your reach, U.N.C.L.E.! We knew defector would talk . . . Planned accordingly. Our leader left the car two miles from villa. We continued on . . . Decoy . . . By now small jet 'copter has picked him up. You swine will never—"

He died with his mouth open, forming a word.

With a gesture of savage disappointment, Illya whirled from the car. His burning eyes searched the sky. Far to the north, beyond Dou-lou's villa, he thought he detected a pinpoint of silver against the blue firmament. It might have been a distant jet 'copter.

But even as Illya's sharp vision caught it, it vanished. Of course, it might have been a trick of his eyes.

TWO

U.N.C.L.E.'s never-sleeping New York complex functioned in an atmosphere as quietly genteel as that of a very posh but sedate alumni club.

At the moment, in fact, Mr. Alexander Waverly might have been mistaken by a casual observer as the member of such a club, refreshing his executive brains in quietude.

Mr. Waverly was the lone occupant of a severely sumptuous reading room whose walls and ceiling were done in panels of bleached, hand-tooled morocco. He was reclining in a massive leather chair with attached foot rest. Silent, oiled machinery within the chair applied an invigorating massage to the length of Mr. Waverly's body.

But he was hard at work, even while his physical being replenished itself. On a frosted glass pane in the ceiling, microfilm copies of the world's most important newspapers were being projected, page by page.

Waverly's quick mind correlated the stream of information, often ferreting out tidbits and spotting meanings in details that would have escaped less experienced eyes. Now and then he murmured aloud, making verbal notes, suggestions; he gave instructions, predicted possibilities, uttered warnings. A sensitive microphone picked his words for taping and a quick relay

to U.N.C.L.E. agents scattered around the globe.

Waverly touched a button in the arm of his chair, and the final page of the Cairo paper shone overhead. He scanned it with his photographic memory and turned the projector off.

He'd detected that a faint shift would be forthcoming in Egyptian foreign policy. Today they had given six paragraphs to the remarks of an American consul. A month ago, a single graph would have sufficed.

Waverly depressed a second button and the chair folded itself to a sitting position. Waverly pinched the bridge of his nose. The sessions with the variegated languages of the world press were always tiring, even with the soothing effects of the chair.

A section of the wall slid open and a young, svelt female U.N.C.L.E. technician stepped into the room.

"We have the telly-conference ready, Mr. Waverly."

"Excellent. Immediately."

The slight hunch of his neck and the sag of flesh under his eyes attested to the load of work and responsibility that Waverly carried as a section chief in U.N.C.L.E.'s top echelon division of Policy and Operations. But he rose from his chair with dignified alacrity and departed the reading room as if he were going to join old friends at a bridge table.

He followed the girl down a short corridor. A door slid open and they stepped into a plushly-carpeted room with cathedral windows and metallic drapes that swept to the floor.

The center of the room was occupied by a conference table of Honduran mahogany that looked as if it weighed half a ton.

But there was only a single chair at the table, a Gothic backed arm-chair, slightly smaller than a throne, placed at the table's nearest end. Ranged on the table, facing the executive chair, were three twenty-five-inch television screens.

Mr. Waverly seated himself, taking out his briar as if he were nonchalantly preparing to discuss plans for an office party.

Trim in her uniform, her sunny hair like cake frosting, the young technician crossed to a console where winking lights chased each other. The console was linked to others like it in the major capitals of the world. The system was made possible by U.N.C.L.E.'s own communications satellites, broadcasting on ultra high frequency and scrambling words and pictures in the process.

The girl spun a dial. A voice filtered into the room: "Mexico City is ready."

"Come in, Mexico City," the technician replied.

The lean visage of Napoleon Solo flashed on one of the screens before Mr. Waverly.

"I trust you are in good health, Mr. Waverly," Solo said, looking at Waverly as if both were actually present at the same conference table.

"Quite, Mr. Solo. Let me commend you for the dispatch with which you cleared up that smuggling matter for our Mexican friends."

"Thank you, sir. Now with a weekend in the sun at Acapulco to take the kinks out of my muscles—"

"I'm afraid the bikinied young ladies of Acapulco will have to manage without you this weekend, Mr. Solo."

"They'll die of disappointment," Napoleon Solo assured his chief.

"But the survivors will look forward to you so much more intensely. Meanwhile, Mr. Kuryakin has arrived in Rome from Athens with Dr. Marko Doulou. Shall we have a chat with them?"

Waverly inclined his head toward the technician. "Bring in Rome, please."

The circuits were at ready. All the girl had to do was punch a button. The images of Illya Kuryakin and Dr. Doulou appeared at the conference table.

Solo and Illya looked at each others in their respective screens in Mexico City and Rome, and exchanged casual greetings. Dr. Doulou was introduced to Napoleon Solo by Waverly.

The scientist expressed his pleasure, added: "Very clever, this telly-

conference. "We're at distant ends of the earth, yet you are so lifelike on the screen here in Rome I feel almost as if I could reach out and shake hands with you."

"You and Mr. Solo may have that pleasure in the near future," Waverly said. "Mr. Solo, are you familiar with Dr. Doulou's professional achievements?"

"Who isn't? He's the agronomist who knows more about grains than any other human being on this planet."

"Quite true," Alexander Waverly said. "His latest line of research, vital to the world, is now in the hands of THRUSH. And that's where we come in. We've never been faced with a job more urgent."

Waverly drew in a heavy breath. "I will let Dr. Doulou brief us. But mind you, Doctor," Waverly gave an admonishing waggle of his briar, "in layman's language, without the scientific terms and details that would confuse us."

Doulou nodded. His eyes were somber. "As you know, gentlemen, half the world's population will go to bed with empty bellies tonight. With each passing hour, the population explosion aggravates the problem. The problem to which I applied myself—"

He paused to wipe his neck with a damp handkerchief. "The first primitive farmers worked with plants that were little more than weeds. Centuries of selective breeding produced the grains we

know today. But we've not that kind of time left to us. Not centuries. Perhaps not even decades.

"However, we do have a weapon unavailable to men of the past. In the invisible sub-world of the atom, we have the power to produce mutations, those departures through which the process of evolution operates. And that, simply put, was the basis of my research. I discovered a sub-atomic particle, harmless to animal tissue, that in theory would affect the basic genetic structure of grains.

"In short, I saw the possibility of bringing about almost instantly a mutated, high-yield grain that would have taken centuries to produce by evolution through selective breeding."

"And it worked," Napoleon Solo hazarded, "and THRUSH got hold of it. Now they hope to lure the human race to defeat through its stomach."

"A very logical deduction, Mr. Solo," Waverly said, "but entirely wrong. We face sheer disaster—because the Doulou Particle did *not* work."

"The contrary was true, Napoleon," Kuryakin said. "The mutant grain reverted to its prehistoric state, yielding little more than a husk on a spindly stalk."

"Instead of creating food, I destroyed it!" Doulou said in a voice ragged with self-incrimination.

"Easy, Doctor," Waverly's suave tones became gentle, comforting.



"No one blames you. Research is just that. A search, a blind alley. A re-searching, over and over again, until the accumulated facts reveal a truth. Edison knew that a certain material should glow when energized by an electric current. But how many hundreds of materials did he test before his searching turned up the right one?"

Doulou closed his eyes. "Would to God the price of my false start was no higher than Edison's!"

The doctor breathed heavily for a few seconds. When he opened his eyes, they were haunted. "If THRUSH perverts the particle to use as a weapon, can you visualize the horror, gentlemen? Bread becomes non-existent . . . grain-eating livestock perishes . . . Men slaughter each other for a crust.

"But the thousands, millions killed in the food riots will be the lucky ones. Pity those survivors who turn into wild beasts, mindless with hunger, who start eating each other!"

THREE

NAPOLEON SOLO endured a moment of trance-like numbness. His mind refused to accept the harrowing pictures Dr. Doulou had verbally painted.

"Earth may be a grain of sand in the universe," he said, "but it's a sizeable chunk of material as we humans see it. Are the nations supposed to sit still while THRUSH agents scatter the Doulou Particle over the fields and crops?"

"Any group or nation with nuclear capabilities may prepare the particle, Mr. Solo," Doulou said heavily. "Carried aloft by ordinary missiles, a couple of run-of-mill atom bombs, exploded at the edge of outer space over the polar regions, would scatter the particle sufficiently. The particle would diffuse through the atmosphere and reach the earth's surface as fall-out. Its effects would show up in the next grain crops."

Solo stared at the faces ranged in the visi-screens. Kuryakin looked as hard as white marble. Waverly had not twitched a muscle, but Solo detected a sheen of fine sweat on his chief's brow. This evidence of Waverly's inner feelings was more than cause for alarm.

Still, Solo's mind fought for a way out, a reasonable objection. "Are you telling me that THRUSH has decided to destroy what it can't conquer? As Hitler dedicated himself to total destruc-

tion of a world slipping out of his grasp?"

Waverly gave the reply. "Hardly, Mr. Solo. THRUSH's fanaticism is of a different turn. THRUSH values its own self interests too highly. THRUSH will not destroy itself merely to annihilate the rest of us. THRUSH is greedy for a world to exploit, filled with living slaves, not for an empty desolation."

Napoleon Solo leaned forward. His jacket button grated and broke on the edge of the conference table. "You are implying—"

"Yes, Mr. Solo?"

"That THRUSH will have food-stuffs while its opposition dies of starvation."

Waverly's bushy brows inched closer together. "I have racked my brain. You have stated the only possible deduction. The Doulou Particle is but half of their master plan. As you point out, Mr. Solo, the particle becomes the most potent weapon ever to fall into their hands only if THRUSH can offer an alternative to starvation."

"Do you know what this alternative is?"

Waverly tapped the bit of his briar against his lip. "Our entire computer system has been busy on the subject from the moment we got wind of the attack on Dr. Doulou. We've also had the assistance of a defecting THRUSH man who offered his brains for thorough picking in exchange for asylum.

"And, I might add, my own mental faculties have been wholly occupied with the problem. Every factor indicates that the answer lies locked in the brain of a brilliant young marine biologist—and pray we are right! We won't have a chance to second-guess!"

"My assignment?" Solo asked.

"Indubitably, Mr. Solo," Waverly said.

"Who is this marine biologist? And where do I find him?"

"To answer your questions in reverse order, Mr. Solo. Not a him. A her. Very lovely, too, I might add. She is Princess Andra Chau-petl. Genuine, blue-blooded royalty, but not India-Indian, if I may coin a phrase. Her forebears were Aztec kings."

Solo eased warily back in his chair. His chief, he knew, would dish up the complexities of the assignment in his own time, own way.

"Mr. Solo," Waverly said, almost musingly, "you know of course that the most abundant supply of foodstuff on this planet comes not from the soil."

"You're speaking of the limitless plankton in the oceans and seas."

"Precisely, Mr. Solo. The inexhaustible, endless stuff that feeds everything from the shrimp to the whale."

"But the best scientific brains haven't yet figured a way to harvest plankton and process it for human consumption. Unless—" Solo's voice trickled off.

"I sense the conclusion you've reached," Waverly said. "And you are quite correct. We believe Princess Andra has achieved a breakthrough in the plankton problem. Else THRUSH would not have considered the time ripe to put its latest scheme in operation."

Solo slouched in his chair, eyes half closed, a faint twitch at the corner of his mouth revealing the tension he was under.

"Summed up, then, THRUSH's two-fold plan is simple. First, use the Doulou Particle to plunge the world into a state of starvation, massive riot, chaos. Second, lure the survivors into eternal slavery by offering them a share of the harvest from the oceans, which THRUSH, and only THRUSH, monopolizes with Princess Andra's process."

"I could not have expressed it more succinctly myself," Waverly said. "The man behind this master stroke by THRUSH bears a curious resemblance to Mr. Kuryakin. We can assume that he is brilliant, even though he has perverted his talents to evil. Such a man will have left traces of himself in academic and scientific circles. Our research people are hard at work running down his identity. We also have the problem of a new THRUSH weapon——hot togs."

"Come again?" Solo said, eyes snapping wide.

"A garment that carries its own power pack," Waverly said. "Worn

by a THRUSH agent, it makes him as lethal as a high-voltage transformer."

"We had a spot of luck," Kuryakin said, "and got hold of some of the suits when Dr. Doulou and I stopped a limosine carrying three THRUSH agents."

"Our technicians are taking the suits apart a thread at a time," Waverly said. "As soon as we have devised a defense, we shall of course advise you."

"Meantime," Kuryakin added wryly, "don't tap a THRUSH agent on the shoulder."

"Excellent advice," Waverly said. "Quite."

"Meanwhile," Solo said, "where do I find this daughter of the fabulous Aztec kings, this Princess Andra?"

"At a small city on the coast of Peru, Mr. Solo. It's called Chambasa. The waters there teem with marine specimens. The princess has a laboratory located on a large estate which she inherited."

"Then I should be off, if there's nothing else on your mind, Mr. Waverly."

"I—ah—as a matter of fact, there is one more thing," Waverly said. "Princess Andra doesn't need money and she's not particularly concerned with being famous. She pursues her line of research simply because it fascinates her. Art for art's sake, in a manner of speaking."

"As a consequence, she is something of a loner. I can't say that

she cares very much for undercover agents, either. Her father happened to be an altruistic political leader who was murdered during a South American revolt. The experience left the princess more than somewhat embittered against anything smacking of politics."

Solo exhaled a long breath. "Are you finished now, Mr. Waverly?"

"For the moment, yes. I have outlined your immediate problems. Kuryakin will lend you a hand shortly."

"And you might have given me something simple. Like, say, merely blowing a hole in the sky."

ACT TWO

FARM GIRL OF THE SEAS

THE PEOPLE of Chambasa referred to the Chaupetl residence as El Castillo, The Castle. Spoken with a certain comfortable arrogance, the tag became a descriptive phrase. The Chambasan said "El Castillo" the same way that a New Yorker might say "Empire State Building" or a Japanese "Fujiyama". Each took it for granted that the label would evoke the picture of the whole.

The folder issued by the tourist bureau in Lima was more explicit. It devoted a paragraph to Chambasa, and a dozen to The Castle.

Situated on a promontory overlooking Chambasa and the harbor, The Castle was a gray pile that

somehow escaped the gloomy look of most such structures. It did not suggest dungeons or dank, dripping, secret stairways, or screams echoing from a torture rack.

Instead, its sunny, ivy-covered walls and ramparts reminded one of childhood tales of knights in shining armor and gracious ladies. It was a castle in the air, straight out of Lewis Carroll or the Wizard of Oz. Its backdrop on one hand was the sparkling Pacific; on the other, the rugged Andes pierced the clouds.

Dion Gould acquainted himself with floor plans of The Castle in the dusty archives of the Cuzco Museum.

It had originally been built with Indian slave labor by a Spaniard descended from a member of Pizarro's staff. Falling into disuse and marked with the scars of ruin as time swallowed the generations and fortunes of men, The Castle had eventually been incorporated into the estate of the Chaupetls.

The final restoration had been made by Princess Andra's grandfather, as much to preserve an historical landmark as for his own use.

The original builder, Gould noted, had feared both rebellious natives and designs against his blood-stained gold by his own kind. He'd made his redoubt just about attack-proof. The thick outer walls would survive cannon fire from men-o'-war lying in the harbor.

Attack parties rash enough to

scale the barren heights would have found the single entrance to the courtyard blocked by a massive, finely-balanced iron door.

Mulling about the long table strewn with the drawings, the THRUSH master-brain had a pleasurable sense of power. He had the means to reduce the redoubt to shattered gravel, if he cared to snap his fingers. Gould laughed as he thought of the crude ships, inefficient swords, and puny cannon of a by-gone era.

You had to admit one thing, though. Those old boys had done a remarkable job of butchery with their available means. What might they have done with the firepower that a present-day THRUSH team enjoyed!

He broke off the interesting speculation. His own prospects were too dazzling for him to waste time thinking of the feeble successes of past conquerors. He thought of the nearness of total victory, and a savagely glorious sensation shot through him.

He was Dion Gould, free of the moral stupidities that fettered mortal men! The earth would be his, simply because he had the god-like power to reach and take it, mold it to any shape he wished!

The power of THRUSH was at his beck and call. The Doulou Particle was being readied. The missiles even now were being set up to carry the particle aloft and scatter it over the earth.

Gould thought of the time it had taken. The plotting, the dirty work, the rise through the ranks, the involvement of his plan and the scheming to get it accepted.

Now a single final step remained. The answer to a single question: "When the earth has ceased to yield, how do we harvest the seas to feed our slaves?"

When I've picked the answer from the brain of Princess Andra, he thought, no power on earth can stop me.

But he knew it must be done quickly, quietly. Correlating every known factor, U.N.C.L.E. would detect the pattern. Their brains and computers would struggle through to the importance of Princess Andra's research. No helping that. But it wouldn't do U.N.C.L.E. the slightest bit of good. The wire was just ahead, and U.N.C.L.E. was barely out of the starting gate.

Even as he hurried from the museum, Gould had devised the tactic to turn the final trick. He knew a moment of breathless admiration for the cleverness and rapidity with which his mind worked.

Marlene Reine was waiting in a rented car at the dusty curb. As Gould slid in beside her, she said, "You seem very pleased with yourself. Discover a secret entrance to Her Highness's inner chambers?"

A breeze washed Gould's blonde bangs across his high forehead. He raised a finger to flip the hair back. "Any secret tunnels were not in-

cluded in the formal plans. No, there are only two ways into The Castle. From above, or below. It would be a risky job to drop a 'copter in the courtyard. The area's cut up by fountains, arbors, secondary buildings. Anyway, a 'copter would warn the inhabitants of our arrival."

"Which leaves us below," Marlene said. She was cool blonde perfection, perfectly formed from toe to crown, lovelier than the dream of the artists who worshipped female beauty. Almost icy—except for the hint of savage passion lurking in the depths of her frost-blue eyes.

She rested her palms on the steering wheel and watched Gould closely. She knew he had something clever up his sleeve. He was not as adept at masking himself with her as he was with other people.

She understood him better than even she sometimes wanted to. She had known him from early in his THRUST career. She'd been with the supragovernment a year longer. They'd gravitated on a personal basis when both had been assigned to a minor affair in the Middle East.

She'd sensed very quickly that Dion Gould was a personality that would rise to the top or destroy itself in the attempt. The prospect fascinated her as much as the man himself did. Tactily, they'd linked their lives, their work, the icy dynamite of their personal emotions. She was the cool counterbalance

for Gould's sometimes erratic impulses.

They'd made a great team. She was his most trusted adviser, furthering his career, and thereby her own, at every opportunity. Now they were on the brink of the biggest coup in history.

"When you're quite through breaking your mental arms patting yourself on the back," she said, "perhaps you'll tell me how we're to get into The Castle."

"There is only one entrance, my dear. The massive portal in the outer wall. So THRUSH shall walk in."

"Just like that?"

"How else?"

She reached and patted his cheek lightly. "Don't be droll with me, darling. Remember that Andra's father was a high politico. Some of his personal bodyguard have remained with her. Including that captain of the guard, Pico, who lost an eye and part of his face in the explosion that killed her father."

"Quite a fellow, that Pico," Gould mused. "Wish we had a few like him. He tried to throw himself across the bomb, give his life to save the man whose life was in his keeping."

"You're not thinking of trying to bribe such a man?"

"My dear," Gould tipped her chin with his fingers, brushed her lips lightly with his. "That remark is unworthy of you. Certainly you

can't think I'm asinine enough to consider a bribe attempt on a man who—"

"How then? Strike The Castle in force?"

"And chance our prize escaping or perhaps getting killed in the fray?" Gould made a clucking sound with his tongue; knowing his question needed no answer.

"Very well," Marlene said. "Keep it to yourself. It's your problem and I—"

"All right." His youthful face slipped into cunning lines, "Here it is. A small group of girls from a veddy-veddy private school—let's make it the Somerset Academy For Young Ladies, shall we?—are furthering their education through travel. What could be more natural for them to include The Castle and its famous young lady occupant in their itinerary?"

"Even Pico couldn't suspect a small group of lassies chaperoned by their headmistress, Madame Reine! Unless you have slipped badly, my dear, you'll have no trouble arranging a tour of the historic Castle."

"It will take some doing." Marlene's eyes glinted, weighing all the factors.

"Really, Marlene! THRUSH can jet in the necessary girls for you to pick up outside Chambasa before you have time to arrange your makeup in the manner of Madame Reine, Head Mistress."

Marlene laughed, then made a

face. "The role sounds dreary. School teacher—me!"

"The courses you could teach, my dear, would not be for children! Meantime, let's hope U.N.C.L.E. tries to get a finger into this one. They owe us for one specially built black limousine, wrecked. And three reasonably efficient, if stupid, agents, dead. It would be my pleasure to chop some U.N.C.L.E. finger off! Even heads!"

TWO

THE BAR was called El Cerdo. El Cerdo. The Pig. Napoleon Solo reflected that the proprietor either had a sense of humor or a brazenly Latin contempt for his customers.

Despite its name, the bar had certain things going for it. The potted palms were green, not droopy brown. The bar, if somewhat scarred, was a rare old piece of mahogany. The thick walls and high vaulted ceiling protected one from the glare of the Chambasan sun.

The faded back-bar murals (playful nymphs tripping lightly across a jungle clearing) suggested that an artist of rare talent had frequented The Pig in some past, forgotten day. Perhaps he had traded talent for booze.

This was the hour of siesta, and Solo was the only customer. He sat at a table near the dusty front windows, sipping *amontillado*. The wine was another thing El Cerdo had going for it. As the very dry

elixir rolled across his tongue it left a pleasant, faintly nut-like aftertaste. Solo had never sampled better.

But he couldn't really enjoy the fine vintage. His mind and nerves were too keyed to the job at hand. He looked at the watch on his wrist, then at the town plaza outside. The broad sweep of the cobbled paving, the old faces of squat buildings of sun-baked mud brick and stone composited to form a study of almost total still-life.

A lone woman in shawl, *dirndl*, and rope-soled *guarachas* was crossing the square to the fountain at its center. She carried a large clay pottery jar, leaning over the wall of the splashing fountain to fill it.

Closer at hand, a peon in *serape* and *sombrero* dozed on the seat of a hay-laden cart. Between the shafts, a donkey drooped, as contented as the man to be useless in the time of siesta.

And then Solo's alert brown eyes quickened in his lean, chiseled face. A jeep-type vehicle had appeared in the mouth of the broad avenue at the upper end of the square.

The stumpy, open car raced beyond the mist that the fountain cast toward the brazen sky. It quickly completed the circuit of the square and came to a rocking stop near the hay-loaded cart.

The jeep had a single occupant, who disentangled himself from behind the wheel and got out with a

lack of grace that reminded Solo of a man trying stilts for the first time.

Solo was already on his feet, a frown smashed into his forehead. He'd expected two people to keep the appointment, not this lone man in slightly dingy whites who looked as if he were a scarecrow no longer able to frighten the raucous birds.

Under different circumstances, Napoleon Solo might have felt quick sympathy for the fellow. He was so incredibly tall and thin, at least seven feet if an inch, with just about the proportion of meat scattered over his bones that would have done nicely for a man a foot and half shorter. In addition, he was about the most morosely ugly man Solo had ever met.

His face was long and hungry looking, with the bones thrusting out over sadly shadowed caverns. His skin was as swarthy as dried mud. And to top everything else, he had but one eye, his left. It bulged, as if straining under the burden of doing double duty. The place where the other eye had been was covered by a black leather patch.

Towering over Solo's stalwart height, the man took off his floppy panama, wiped a sweaty forehead that was a series of corrugations.

"Senor Napoleon Solo?" His popping eye bounced a look about the interior of El Cerdo. "You must be he, since no one else is present except a bartender who balances on his stool and snores. I am Pico."

Coming from its source, Pico's



voice was astonishing, warm, genteel, liquid.

"Yes, I am Solo."

"It is a pleasure!" Pico extended a hand that gripped Solo's like a band of case-hardened steel. It suddenly struck Napoleon that as skinny as Pico might be, so was a stick of dynamite! The guy's reputation as a fighter probably wasn't exaggerated after all.

Solo extended his hand, an invitation to a chair at his table.

"Are we to await Princess Andra?"

Pico shook his head. "She is not coming."

"But when I phoned her immediately on my arrival in Chamba-sa—"

"Senor, remember—she made no promises."

"When she refused to extend me the courtesy of The Castle and mentioned a meeting here, I assumed—"

Pico scratched his long chin. "I thought you U.N.C.L.E. people never act on an assumption."

"Sometimes we have to." Solo leaned forward. "Perhaps I didn't make the urgency of this meeting clear. We haven't a moment to waste. While we sit here talking—"

Pico lifted a palm. "How you English-speaking people do rush! Senor, we are divorced from politics, since the death of her father, the Premier Chaupetl—" His hand drifted to his eye-patch. "—when I also should have died!"

"Just like that." Solo snapped his fingers. "It doesn't matter to you if the world—"

"The world has always been in turmoil, Senor. Kings, dictators, presidentes, nations, they come and go. We are—neutral." The final word seemed painful to him. He drew a breath. "We have retired to our world of science, where politics is a foreign devil."

Solo's shoulders dipped under the weight of disappointment. For a moment he had a blind, savage wrath for this princess whom he'd never seen. Who did she think she was? An exception to the human race, on whom the most horrible devastation in history was about to fall?

Pico's good eye was penetrating. As one man of action to another, he seemed to sense a little of Solo's urgency and desperation.

"I'm sorry, Senor. Truly, I am."

Napoleon ground out, "You

think I'm disappointed for myself? I wish it were as simple as that! Your princess! She hasn't retired to an ivory tower. She's buried herself in a pile of vine-covered rock that might just serve as a grave marker for millions!"

Pico tilted his head. "Senor, that's a large pill to swallow."

"But swallow it, you must. And Princess Andra also. Don't you see, man? That's the whole purpose of my mission here. To make her understand. Once she does, I'm sure, she'll give generously of her time, work, talents."

Pico's eye shaded with worry.

Solo detected an advantage, and pressed it. "The work of U.N.-C.L.E., the nature of the organization, is not entirely unknown to you?"

"Of course not, Senor! U.N.-C.L.E. never had occasion to deal with my commandanté, the Premier Chaupetl, but I have a layman's knowledge of U.N.C.L.E."

"Then if I told you that we need you, would you refuse?"

Pico smiled without humor. "Personally, I would jump at the chance. As old and worn as I am, I could still savor the prospect of a first-class fight. But the decision, Senor, is not mine to make. The princess has decided once and for all. She will not again become involved with a political faction."

"There's just one catch, Pico."

"Senor?" The bulging eye lifted.

"Neither can Princess Andra

make the final decision. It will be made for her."

"By you, Senor?"

"THRUSH has already posed the alternative for us, and the princess as well. We win, Pico, or the world, as we know it, dies!"

The words were not without effect. Pico's long, ugly face tightened with indecision. "If what you say is true—but on what evidence do you base this mammoth prophecy?"

"Do you believe that U.N.C.L.E. acts without evidence?"

"Of course not, Senor! But how can THRUSH fit Princess Andra and her work into a scheme for world conquest?"

"If I convince you, will you assist us?"

"I enter no conspiracy, Senor!"

Solo exploded a breath. "And no one suggests it. But you have influence with her. You could be invaluable in getting her to change her mind."

"I will listen to you, Senor," Pico said stiffly. "From my youth, I have risked my life many times in the cause of justice. I will hear your charges against THRUSH."

Earnestly and rapidly, Napoleon Solo bit out the facts. The THRUSH attack on Dr. Doulou. The theft of the formula for the Doulou Particle. The devastation the particle could wreck on the food supply of the earth.

At this point, Pico interrupted. His visage had chilled into lines

that were absolutely demoniac. "I anticipate you, Senor. In this most cowardly and debased plan for conquest, the Doulou Particle sets the stage. But the monopoly of a new food supply is necessary for the final act."

"If they get hold of your princess and her process to harvest plankton from the seas, it'll be the final curtain, Pico. The last act will be over. Only the epilogue will remain. It can be told in two words: world enslavement."

Pico towered his great height over the table. "I believe you suggested that I undertake the role of diplomat, Senor."

"Indubitably!"

"Will you accompany me while I acquaint the princess with the facts?"

"I'd be delighted!"

THREE

IN LATER TIMES, Napoleon Solo was to be soberly grateful that dry hay cannot be shifted without a distinct crackling sound. On such trifling physical qualities the life of a man from U.N.C.L.E. may sometimes depend.

Out of habit so long engrained it had become instinct, Solo let the glare of the sun catch his face, adjust his eyes, before he stepped into the blinding glare of the street in the wake of Pico.

Beside Pico, he was halfway across the dusty sidewalk when the

whisper of sound reached his ears. Again, his sharply honed instincts reacted.

He flipped a glance over his shoulder. The donkey remained droopy between the shafts of the hay-laden cart. But the man on the seat had come to violent life. So had the hay. It was exploding and spilling out of the cart as if a violent dust devil had struck it.

Reering up amid the shower of hay were two men.

Pico was in the act of getting in his jeep. Napoleon Solo turned and jack-knifed his body into the tall man. They tumbled, as angry hornets buzzed through the space they'd occupied a split instant before.

Solo shoved the scrambling weight of Pico behind the protective steel tail gate of the jeep, fell on his knees beside him.

"I believe we are entertaining a THRUSH delegation, my friend." Solo's words were emphasized by the snarl of a bullet from a silenced gun.

For the first time, Pico's face relaxed, a smile splitting the homely visage. He had recovered from the surprise of the attack instantly. Solo had to afford him a quick moment of admiration. This kind of thing was something that Pico understood.

"They'll try to rush and flank us, catch us in a crossfire." Pico had pulled a murderous looking Luger from under his dingy white

jacket. Solo had his U.N.C.L.E. Special in his hand.

Pico's trained eye had already latched onto a tactical position, the mouth of an alley a few yards down the sidewalk.

Pico was no longer the awkwardly tall freak. His body had the silken resilience and limberness of nylon as he fired himself from the cover of the jeep.

He hit the sidewalk rolling, the protection of the alley his destination. As he moved, his Luger cannonaded, shattering the peaceful stillness of Chambasa's siesta.

A man screamed on the sidewalk, hidden from Solo by the jeep. Solo slithered around the street-side of the jeep. Sure enough, there was a second man jerking to a stop and flipping a glance at his cohort who'd been hit.

The THRUSH agent jerked his mind back to his job, but not in time. Even as he fired, a slug from the U.N.C.L.E. pistol caught him in the solar plexus. A rattling gasp was knocked from him. His body snapped like a book closing. His hands grabbed at his middle. He struck the cobblestones on his back, pitched to one side and lay still.

The startled donkey had lifted his head, twitched his ears. He trotted across the square, the cart behind him spilling wisps of straw.

The third THRUSH agent had dived beneath the cart. Now without cover, he rose to a half crouch, savage curses ripping from his lips.

Pico, on the sidewalk, was exposed to him for a moment. As he fired, an U.N.C.L.E. bullet struck his shoulder. The impact knocked the weapon from his hand, half turned him.

Clutching his shoulder, the man reeled on spraddled legs toward the square in a blind, reasonless attempt to escape.

After half a dozen steps, his knees gave away. He crumpled in the middle of the street, teeth set, eyes hot with hatred.

As Napoleon Solo ran toward the wounded agent, Pico fell in step beside him.

"Senor," Pico grinned, "I rather liked that bit of work. They expected us to hold to cover, to shoot if we ventured a look or a shot from behind the jeep. Then I suppose they had the pervertedly funny idea to toss a plastique behind the jeep when they were in position. But we pulled a surprise of our own, did we not?"

Solo flipped a glance up at Pico's swarthy face and found the smile infectious. "Yes, Pico. You did. Your gambit was both quick and unexpected."

"Useful elements in dealing with an enemy, Senor."

They reached the fallen man, coming to a stop on either side of him. All about them, life was quickening in Chambasa as people appeared in windows and doors, aroused by the thunder of Pico's gun.

As Pico started to drop to one knee beside the writhing THRUSH agent, Napoleon reached out and gave the tall man a hard shove backward.

Pico blinked his eye. "Senor?" He stumbled back, caught his balance on his heels.

"Don't touch him, Pico."

"But Senor—I would wring a truthful cackle out of this rooster!"

"I doubt if he knows anything beyond his simple assignment to assassinate us if it appeared you were relenting and taking me to the princess."

People began to gather, men, women, even children.

"Pico!" Napoleon clipped. "Keep them back until the policio arrive. Someone might stumble, touch him."

Solo spread his arms and began hammering out orders to the crowd to stand clear.

Pico joined the effort, threw a question over his shoulder. "Senor, this talk of touching him—"

"He may be wearing hot togs under that peon outfit."

"Hot togs, Senor?"

"Made from a highly conductible material," Solo explained, "energized with a mini-pack. The agent is insulated, but anybody who touches him might take a quick trip into eternity!"

A group of four policemen cleared a way through the crowd with shoving hands and a stream of Spanish.

Solo had dropped in a crouch beside the THRUSH man, reached and taken a stick from the hand of a small boy who'd crawled through a forest of legs to the forefront of the crowd.

With the tip of the stick, Solo parted the front of the agent's shirt. Apparently THRUSH hadn't had time to get hot togs to the assassins, or—Solo fervently hoped this was the case—the suits were as yet in short supply. At any rate, nothing glinted beneath the man's shirt except his sweating flesh.

Napoleon Solo rose as the shadows of the policemen fell across him. The one in charge was short, stocky, agitated and shocked by the violence that had erupted in his usually-peaceful village.

"Senor!" he demanded. "What terrible things are going on here? I warn you—"

"One moment," Pico shoved between Solo and the police capitan. The words of the tall man had an instantly calming effect.

"Ah, Senor Pico! But don't tell me you have a part in all this!"

"Very much," Pico said. "This wounded one is the agent of enemies who would enslave us all." A murmur passed through the crowd.

"Take him to your jail, *Capitan*, and find an undertaker for the two dead ones. I will personally vouch for Mr. Solo here and stand responsible for a full official report at the quickest opportunity."

The officer thumbed back a bat-

tered peaked cap and scratched his forehead. "It is most irregular, Pico."

"I know. I make a personal plea for the stretching, not the breaking, of a rule. I want Mr. Solo released temporarily in my custody."

"Coming from anyone but you, Pico, I wouldn't consider the request. This man who looks so Americano would cool his feet in our jail until the facts are all amassed."

"Capitan," Pico said in the tones of a commander, "Mr. Solo may be vital to the safety of Princess Andra and a deadly plot that has been hatched against us all!"

A gasp rippled through the crowd. The princess's name flashed from lip to lip. Clearly, she was literally their princess to most of the villagers.

The policeman's eyes darted about the crowd as if seeking advice or other shoulders on which he could park his responsibility. And while the little man endured his moment of indecision, Pico took Napoleon Solo by the arm and simply walked him through the crowd.

Behind them, the villagers pressed in on the police and the wounded THRUSH man, chattering like magpies.

Pico and Solo covered the last few yards to the jeep in a dash. They tumbled into the seat, Pico behind the wheel.

"We must get out of here before

this man has a second thought and decides to detain us," Pico said.

Solo braced himself as Pico U-turned the jeep in a wild slithering of screaming tires. "Your courage is matched only by your wisdom, Pico!"

FOUR

DON GOULD skulked unseen across the hot, barren waste of jagged rocks. The view from his vantage point was breathtaking. But he was not interested in the vista of the blue Pacific far below.

His attention was centered on The Castle and its approaches a little more than a quarter-mile away. At a slightly lower altitude, The Castle, with its tall rounded towers, looked like a painting from a child's picture book. Trimmed hedges and flower gardens graced the walkways of the courtyard. The massive outer wall looked deceptively vulnerable, covered as it was with its soft growth of moss and ivy.

Gould studied the quiet courtyard through his powerful binoculars.

There was little activity. A gardener was clipping a hedge, carefully and unhurriedly. He paused to glance up and chat with a girl servant who leaned out a nearby window.

Clearly, nothing had occurred to upset Princess Andra's quiet mode of secluded life. She had no notion that history was focusing on The

Castle, no concept of the vital, if unwilling role, she was about to play.

Gould laughed. His time table was holding perfectly. Nothing could stop him!

Lying on his stomach, propped elbows holding the binoculars, he shifted his angle of vision and picked up the small car that approached The Castle gate. He knew that a hidden scanner had picked up the arrival of Marlene and her girls.

A man had come from the Gothic main entry and was hurrying across the courtyard. Gould knew that he was a guard, although the man wore conventional business garb, not a formal uniform.

Tension began to tighten Gould's wiry shoulders as he watched the man reach the massive front gate. The guard spoke into a communicator. Marlene and her three girls got out of the car. Gould knew a scanner was looking them over.

The THRUSH master-brain's breath locked inside of him. This was the critical moment. Marlene had used the simple expedient of a phone call to The Castle to pave the way, set the stage. She'd palmed herself off as the tutor from an exclusive girls' school in Connecticut touring with three of her charges.

But now that the crucial moment had arrived, would The Castle play the role of Troy to a rented car that must of necessity in this

modern age substitute for a wooden horse? Would Marlene's forged papers pass muster?

The massive iron gate was grinding open. Marlene and the girls were getting back in the car. It was inching quietly forward.

They were inside! Marlene and three innocent looking girls had breached a fortress that would have withstood an army.

Gould felt dizzy, drunken with the thought of success. He turned and slid down the face of the boulder.

He slipped a communicator the size of a cigarette package from his jacket pocket. He flipped a button and the antenna unfolded itself looking like a thin strand of quivering silver.

"Papa to Boy Scouts. Papa to Boy Scouts," Gould intoned, holding the communicator close to his lips.

"Boy Scouts here. Standing by."

"Sparrows are in the nest. Repeat. Sparrows in nest. Execute RY-three."

"Roger."

Gould stared vacantly into space a moment, visualizing the unseen movements of the team of THRUSH men who were even now moving into position. They would dash into the courtyard the instant Marlene opened the iron gate to them.

Gould crawled back up the face of the boulder. He looked down at the blue, glittering waters of the

harbor in the distance. Even with the powerful field glasses he would have seen no sign of the nuclear powered mini-sub. But he knew it was lurking in the jewel-like depths.

"Isaac Walton to barracuda," he spoke into the communicator.

"Barracuda standing by," the communicator intoned.

"Sparrows in nest," Gould told the mini-sub commander. "Boy Scouts preparing campfire. Stand by."

"Barracuda at the ready," the THRUSH sub commander assured his chief.

Gould collapsed the antenna and returned the communicator to his jacket. His gaze lingered a moment longer on The Castle. He wanted to etch this moment, this very pleasureable moment, in his memory for all time to come. It was instances like this that gave life its zest.

He wondered fleetingly how it would be when he was master of the planet from pole to pole with nothing more to gain.

Would he, like Alexander The Great, find the toy shiny only as long as he was reaching for it? Would the spectre of boredom arise when there was nothing left to conquer?

The thought was disturbing and irritating. He put it firmly out of mind. After all, he wasn't Alexander. Alexander had been a mere piker.

FIVE

PRINCESS ANDRA CHAUPETL received her guests in the great hall.

The decor was a thousand years old. Aztec sculpture graced the hall. A massive calendar stone was set in the center of the glistening expanse of floor tiles. Warrior masks frowned from the towering stone walls.

Against this background, Andra was every inch a princess. Tall and regal, she was dressed in a simple single-piece garment of purple silk, belted at the waist with links of beaten Aztec silver. Her burnished-copper face was sculpted in lines of classic beauty.

She wore no adornment in the lustrous black hair that fell straight to her lovely shoulders, its ends tilting up.

"Welcome to The Castle," she said graciously. "I hope you weren't detained too long at the gate."

"Not at all." Marlene Reine affected the reserve and accent of a New England schoolteacher. For the masquerade she was wearing a prudish outfit: flat-heeled shoes, heavy stockings, severe, mannish suit of gray. The only makeup she wore was a clever touch here and there to make her look as colorless as possible. Heavy black-rimmed spectacles bridged her nose, and her blonde hair was pulled to a bun at the back of her head.



The three THRUSH girls who stood modestly behind her had been attired in the drab skirt-and-blouse requirement of a severe girl's school.

"I must admit," Marlene added, "it did give me a turn, obeying a voice from an unseen source and having my person and credentials

undergo inspection by a television camera."

"We pray for the day," Princess Andra sighed, "when such precautions will no longer be necessary."

"We are grateful for an audience under any circumstance," Marlene said. "It is these rare experiences that broaden our girls. We like to think we turn out the most cultured young ladies in all New England, which of course means in all of the United States."

"Of course," the princess smiled.

Marlene flicked a hand. "Come, girls! This is a once-in-a-lifetime occasion. Princess Andra, may I present Maude, Ethel, and Helen."

The girls moved a pace forward and spoke in unison: "We are honored, Your Serene Highness."

As they started to drop into deep curtsies, Princess Andra took the hand of the nearest girl. "No, my dears. Here, one human being doesn't bend a knee before another."

"Yes, girls," Marlene said with a flicker of a smile, "let's avail ourselves of all that this unique place has to offer."

Something about the words caused a slight frown to chase across Andra's smooth forehead. She glanced at Marlene. The eyes behind the heavy spectacles were slits of fire.

The princess fell back a step. She flung a glance about herself. The three girls had casually ringed her in. They no longer had the appear-

ance of innocent school girls. Their sinewy motions and eyes were suggestive of predatory cats.

The princess paled, but said coolly, "I think we'd better have a second, closer look at your credentials, Madame Reine."

"Now, girls!" Marlene said.

As she spoke, she turned. A single guard was on duty in the arched entrance to the great hall. He stiffened to alertness as the swift change shattered the scene before him.

Marlene's camera, carried on a shoulder strap, was such a usual tourist accoutrement that it had passed unnoticed. She was lifting it, sighting through the viewfinder, as she turned.

Behind her, Marlene heard the sudden scuffle as the girls closed on the princess. Before her, the guard hurled himself forward, his mouth opening to shout a warning.

Marlene depressed a button that might have triggered the shutter on an ordinary camera. The weapon emitted a cough. She had the guard squarely in the telescopic sight that was disguised as a viewfinder.

She saw the dart strike the guard in the left cheek. He lifted a hand, as he would brush away a fly. And then, a convulsive arching of his back jerked him on tiptoe. He seemed to hang suspended for a bare tick in time; then all the joints of his body folded and he collapsed in a heap.

The dart that had struck him had

been a miniature syringe, emptying on impact the deadly, synthesized drug. In the instant the drug had flashed through bloodstream to brain, the guard had died.

Before the guard hit the floor, Marlene was spinning about. The girls had overpowered the princess, wrestled her to the floor. They were a thrashing, struggling tangle. Then one of the girls seized the princess by the hair and slammed her head against the floor. The princess went limp. The girls disengaged themselves and rose slowly.

Marlene's face burned with color.

"You fool!" She slapped one of the girls across the cheek. "You know the importance of keeping the princess wholly intact until her brains have been picked! If you've done more than given her a mild concussion, you'll answer to Dion himself!"

Marlene dropped to one knee beside Princess Andra. She lifted a limp wrist, found the pulse. It was steady and even. The princess's breathing was normal. Marlene watched the royal eyelids flutter.

"Lucky for you she's okay." Marlene got to her feet. "Tape her wrists and mouth, and hold her in that alcove over there. The male team that Dion code-named Boy Scouts will be at the front gate any minute."

Marlene lingered for the time it took one of the girls to remove a

roll of tape from her small clutch bag, give a savage yank on Andra's arms, and begin taping Andra's wrists behind her back.

The soles of Marlene's flat shoes made quick whispers across the polished tiles. As she reached the arched entry, she glanced back. The girls had sealed Andra's lips with tape. The group was disappearing into the shadows of an alcove where stood wax figures in antique conquistadore armor.

A wild excitement, headier than any liqueur or drug, was surging through Marlene. The floor plan that Dion had sketched for her etched itself across her mind.

The gate controls were in the low north tower that overlooked the main courtyard, the portal to the tower a few yards down the enormous vaulted hallway that connected the great hall to the indoor gardens.

Marlene raced to the massive, brass-studded bulkhead of teakwood. She dropped her hand to the heavy bronze door lever, paused to steady her breathing.

She depressed the lever, heard the metal bolt inside slide from its cradle.

The perfectly-balanced door opened at a touch. Before Marlene a narrow stairway of stone wound like a corkscrew aspiring to the heights of the tower.

Marlene went up quickly, with the agility of a lovely ballerina. At the top of the stairway, steeped in

gloom, was a small platform sealed off by a door much lighter and smaller than the one below.

Marlene rapped quickly. The door opened, framing a powerfully built guard who wore khaki pants and shirt and a cap with a glossy visor.

"Hello," Marlene smiled into the swarthy face, "I'm the guest of Princess Andra."

"I know." The man nodded. "The lady from the school in New England."

Marlene casually moved past the man into the circular observation room. Slits in the thick stone wall had afforded the original builders a 360-degree view of the courtyard and outer walls. Electronics had refined this primitive mode of observation. A complicated console occupied a third of the room; a bank of visi-screens pulsed with views picked up by the scanners outside.

"Princess Andra is getting acquainted with the girls preparatory to taking us on a tour of The Castle," Marlene said. "It afforded me the opportunity to have a look at this dreadfully fascinating equipment."

The guard looked at Marlene, the console, the doorway. "Madame; I don't know—No one is usually allowed here."

Marlene glided to him, laid her hand on his arm. Her smile flashed, warm, friendly, blandly innocent. "The field of electro-magnetic

phenonema bewitches me. In fact I've dabbled a bit in electronics."

"Our setup is nothing unusual or spectacular," the guard said. "I'm sure you'd find it uninteresting."

"Oh, no, not at all!" Marlene twittered her hand airily. "However, if you feel we're stretching a rule, I surely won't overstep my bounds as a guest. The princess has been more than generous to us already."

The guard relaxed, following Marlene to the doorway. "I'm glad you understand, Madame."

Marlene gave a short, good-natured laugh. "Of course I do. Oh, one thing!"

"Yes, Madame?"

"A snapshot of you to add to my mementoes of this unforgettable trip. It's all so exotic and exciting! A real live guard in a tower of an ancient castle. Won't I be the envy when I return to school! Just a few steps back. That's it."

"Madame, I'm not sure—"

"Oh, posh! It will only take a moment." Marlene had the camera-gun raised. She was sighting through it. "Wonderful! You look so marvelously efficient, as strong as the stone wall in the background."

The camera coughed in the midst of her words. The guard slapped the bee-sting on his chin. Every nerve and muscle in his body clenched tight, then went as limp as burlap. He struck the floor with

a sodden sound, without a quiver.

Muscles flowing as smoothly as those of a tigress, Marlene closed the door, stepped across the dead guard's body, and glided to the console.

She removed the heavy spectacles and dropped them in the pocket of her jacket. Her gaze flipped across the control buttons of the console.

She didn't have much time to study the setup. On the visi-screen directly in front of her, a car appeared in the narrow road. As the outside scanner picked up the intruding vehicle, a red light pulsed on the console. The thin wail of a siren began sounding across the courtyard.

From Marlene's sensuous lips spilled words not at all in the vocabulary of a New England tutor. She looked at the glowing screen which showed the foreground of the courtyard. Four guards had already appeared down there, armed with high-powered rifles. They were running toward positions on the outer wall, summoned by the siren.

Marlene flicked a wisp of golden hair from her temple. She had to chance the superficial knowledge her quick survey of the controls had given her.

Her long tapered fingers flashed to a row of blue buttons. As she depressed a control, she watched the visi-screen that framed the massive iron door in the outer wall.

The picture remained static, still-life. Failure—

She concentrated on the controls, forcing herself not to waste a precious second looking at the way the approaching THRUSH car was looming in the eye of the outside scanner.

Not one control, she thought, but a combination. How devilishly clever of them.

Her fingers danced over the buttons. And then she felt the slight vibration. She had connected.

She strained toward the visi-screen covering the forward courtyard. The ponderous door was in motion, lifting and tilting under the power of its concealed electric motors. The THRUSH car shot through into the courtyard, brushing its top against the rising door in passage.

Marlene held her breath and watched the brief battle. No battle, really. A massacre, with THRUSH agents spraying the courtyard and cutting the disorganized guards to pieces.

It was over in an instant, with the siren a thin, ridiculous wailing that kept the sudden silence from being total.

Marlene drew in a long breath. Little remained to do now. The THRUSH men would complete operation Boy Scout simply by walking in, carrying Princess Andra Chaupetl out, and removing the female sea-farmer (the phrase was Marlene's own) to a destination

where the brain-picking could be carried out in leisure.

The certainty of success overwhelmed Marlene. Despite the objections that had been raised when Dion Gould first proposed his plan, despite the reluctant go-ahead that had finally been given, Dion was going to rule the world! And who ruled a man, if not his mistress?

Then the burst of laughter caught in Marlene's throat. The outside scanner had picked up the approach of yet another vehicle. It was still far down the steep road. It disappeared around a curve, reappeared, too far yet to make out details. It looked like a jeep.

Marlene strained her eyes as the scanner picked out details. A tall, ugly man with one bulging eye was driving the jeep. Beside him was a leanly handsome man. A familiar face. Marlene had studied photographs of it. Napoleon Solo, the U.N.C.L.E. agent.

Solo was shouting a warning at the one-eyed man. He grabbed the driver's shoulder. He was trying to scream some sense into the one-eyed man's skull. But the driver was more than half blind insofar as caution went. He cuffed Solo aside.

Solo grabbed the wheel, tried to wrestle the jeep up the embankment, but the one-eyed man folded himself across the steering wheel, straightened the slithering jeep, and bore straight ahead to his destination.

He could see nothing but the

open gateway ahead, think of nothing except that his princess was in mortal danger. His own life, and that of Solo's counted for little, weighed against the meaning of the open gateway and the cry of the siren.

The jeep shot through the opening into the courtyard. It was magnificent—and completely foolhardy. It was the wild charge of a Don Quixote with one eye, crazed with the thought that he had failed his trust, his job.

It left Napoleon Solo with no choice, except to draw his U.N.-C.L.E. special as a futile gesture inside the lion's mouth.

Enrapt, Marlene watched in the courtyard visi-screen. As the jeep smashed into the rear of the THRUSH car, Solo and the one-eyed one were diving out.

Solo hit on his shoulder, rolled to the partial shelter of rock planter. The rattle of a THRUSH gun caused him to twist his body and fire. A THRUSH man fell from a nearby doorway, clutching his middle.

Then a THRUSH man tossed a nerve-gas grenade with cool accuracy. Smoke billowed over Solo's temporary cover. He rose, stumbled from the cloud, coughing and holding his throat. He took half a dozen wobbling steps, slipped to his knees, tried to raise his gun, and collapsed.

The ugly, one-eyed man had vanished from the range of the

scanner. The fool had reached the main entry. He must be into the inner gardens!

Then Marlene's ears, not her eyes, told her the rest of it. A blast of gunfire. A scream. And silence. The one-eyed man had paid for his foolhardy devotion to his job with his life.

Marlene staggered back from the console with a shaky gasp. No more of that! She enjoyed excitement, but not this kind of tension.

Yet it had all turned out more than beautifully. In addition to Princess Andra, they had Napoleon Solo as well. Quite a nice dividend. Quite a delightful day's work.

ACT THREE

MOTHER HUBBARD KNEW THE SCORE

IN A THIRD-FLOOR waiting room of the International Hospital in Lima, Illya Kuryakin paced restlessly.

He dropped into a chair, picked up a magazine, read a few of the Spanish captions, let the periodical fall back to the low, bleached-wood table.

He closed his eyes, dropping his head back. His mouth was a gash drawn across his lean face.

Had it been a mere eight hours since he'd arrived at the scene of carnage at The Castle in Chamba-sa? It seemed a century had passed,



each moment filled with anxiety and frustration.

Outside, a nurse in starched white rustled past in the glistening corridor. A chime gave two soft bongs, summoning a doctor. Then footsteps squeaked softly from the corridor's rubber tile to the carpeting of the waiting room. Illya's head jerked up.

Alexander Waverly made a motion with his hand as Illya started to rise. "As you are, Mr. Kuryakin. You look as if you need something even more restful than a chair."

"I didn't expect you personally."

"Your preliminary report was most distressing," Waverly said. "I boarded one of the new long-range supersonic U.N.C.L.E. jets as soon as I could detail lesser matters to other hands."

Tamping his briar with a forefinger, Waverly strolled to the window. He was treated to a vista of the narrow streets of Lima. The mixture of ancient and modern

buildings. He thought of the slum area down there, where squatters in tin and cardboard houses were already on the verge of starvation.

"THRUSH has never before scored such a beat on us," he remarked. "They have the Doulou Particle. They have Princess Andra, and I'm quite sure they have means of extracting her secrets from her." A long breath sighed from him. "They have the world within their grasp, Mr. Kuryakin."

"And they have Napoleon Solo," Illya said bitterly.

Waverly half turned from the window. "A quite painful fact to face," he admitted. "But Solo, you, I—in this matter we are all expendable, so long as THRUSH is stopped. And each tick of time is a death knell, Mr. Kuryakin. The instant THRUSH learns how to harvest plankton and process it for palatable human consumption, you may rest assured that the Doulou Particle will be distributed wholesale over the earth. Then we—and all mankind—are done. All but THRUSH."

"Must you remind me?" Illya said, passing his hand wearily over his face.

"Of course, of course," Waverly cleared his throat. "First things first. Would you care to fill me in on that sketchy preliminary report?"

"I arrived at The Castle too late," the words twisted Illya's mouth. "That's the gist of it. The

element of time favored THRUSH too one-sidedly, that's all. Princess Andra's personal bodyguard, Pico, lay dead in the inner gardens.

"A rapid fire weapon had cut him in two. I'd learned in the village that he and Solo had raced off to The Castle together in a jeep. The jeep was there. Several dead bodies littered the outer courtyard. But Solo was missing. So was the princess."

"Have you determined how THRUSH got into The Castle?"

Illya Kuryakin nodded. "Records in the gate tower showed that a tutor and small group of students from a girl's school in New England had been admitted. THRUSH used some of its brood of chicks for this one."

"Deucedly clever," Waverly admitted. "The educational process of young girls—an appeal Princess Andra would find overwhelming. Blastedly cunning, the way THRUSH even perverts laudable character traits in the opposition. Once inside, the devilish little THRUSHETTES were in position to overpower Andra and open the gate."

"I'd wager last month's expense check you've pegged it accurately."

Waverly flicked his hand. "It could have happened no other way, from the evidence. When you have but one clear assumption before you, deduction is no great trick. Now, in your UHF contact with New York while you were at The

Castle you mentioned a surviving THRUSH man."

"Which brings us here to the hospital," Illya said. "The fellow was lying in the outer courtyard. I thought at first he was dead. A Missile from an U.N.C.L.E. special—Solo's no doubt—had struck him in the mid-section.

"I removed him here immediately. Two of the best surgeons in Peru have now been working—" Illya consulted the chronometer on his wrist—"four hours and thirteen minutes to bring him around."

"We shall both talk to him," Waverly said.

"If he lives. If he will talk. If he knows anything to talk about."

"We shall not presume negative answers to questions we have not yet asked, Mr. Kuryakin!"

Illya straightened his body in the chair. His eyes looked a little less tired. A brief smile touched his mouth. "Thanks for the picker-upper."

"Part of my job," Waverly mumbled. He drew a chair close to Illya's. "I have several reasons for coming in person. These are a few of them."

He fished a small, Florentine silver pillbox from his pocket.

"One might carry aspirin or glycerin pills or a tranquilizer in this contraption," he remarked as he opened the box. "In this instance we have a defensive mechanism I know you'll be glad to have."

Waverly proffered the small

container. Illya took it and looked inside. A single neat row of gelatinous capsules slightly smaller than his little finger were packed inside. He lifted one out, held it to the light. It felt sticky.

Inside the amber jell were several thin filaments that looked like dirty hairs.

Illya Kuryakin raised his brows at Waverly.

"Compliments of a team of the most brilliant young scientists in U.N.C.L.E.'s laboratories," Waverly explained. "Defensive device against those hot togs that have become fashionable among THRUSH men. Just toss one of these against the next hot-togged fellow you meet. The power in the suit will dissolve the jell, and stick these transistors, which you see as lumpy filaments, to the suit.

"The sudden overload will short out the suit. The amplification and consequent short-circuiting should be highly unpleasant for the suit's wearer, who has counted on the normal quantity of insulation built into the suit."

"Should be?" Illya gave Waverly a sidelong look.

Waverly cleared his throat. "The device works perfectly under laboratory conditions. Of course, if you'd care to wait until it's tested further—"

Illya snapped the silver case shut and jammed it in his pocket. "No, thanks. I'd rather depend on laboratory conditions, while you

keep on trying to improve the model."

Waverly's rapid-fire mind had already leaped to the next matter at hand. He pulled a rattling sheaf of onionskin from the inner pocket of his tweedy jacket. "We have run down the identity of the THRUSH brain who is your double, Mr. Kuryakin."

Illya began to strain forward in his chair. Waverly looked over the top of the glasses with a ghost of a smile at Illya. "We don't have to go into detail as to his physical appearance, do we, Mr. Kuryakin? All you'd have to do is look in the mirror."

Illya's eyes expressed no appreciation for the remark.

"Yes, well . . ." Waverly cleared his throat. "Let's see . . . his name is Dion Gould. Fantastically brilliant young man. A Ph.D. in nuclear physics at the age of twenty-three. He worked in private industry for a short period before he dropped from sight, seeing greener grass in the fields of THRUSH. From his professors, college friends, and early employers we've learned that he was a young man dazzled by his own genius."

"An egomaniac, I think we might safely say. Considers himself destined for great things. Feels that power should be his because he is the most remarkable of nature's creations, Dion Gould."

"Natural that he'd gravitate to

THRUSH, consider the organization his eventual tool, his short-cut to his goals," Illya decided.

"Quite right, Mr. Kuryakin. And he is not alone, having both a playmate and adviser in one Marlene Reine. From what we've been able to gather in the limited time, she hasn't the formal knowledge that crams Gould's skull, but she is perhaps even more cunning, devious. She and Gould have figured in three or four THRUSH affairs of which we have record, always in increasingly important roles. Now they are playing for the ultimate stakes."

Illya snapped his fingers. "Marlene Reine! Smart young tutor bringing her girls to tour The Castle!"

"It's more than a possibility, Mr. Kuryakin. A very distinct probability. She and Gould displaying their smooth teamwork—she gaining entry to The Castle while Gould arranges his pawns for the carrying off of Princess Andra."

"And Solo."

"Precisely." Waverly removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. "The carrying off to—where, Mr. Kuryakin?"

Illya couldn't sit still any longer. He jerked himself out of the chair to pace stiffly. "Yes, that does seem to pose the sort of question that one wouldn't find an answer to in fortune cookies. The THRUSH crowd, with Solo and the princess captive, simply didn't leave Cham-

basa by land. As soon as I had the THRUSH agent on his way to the hospital here, I enlisted the aid of the police captain in Chambasa.

"He told me of an earlier skirmish Pico and Napoleon had with some men who'd sneaked in, concealed in a haycart. He'd also, just before I arrived, investigated the report of two abandoned cars on the beach."

"So Gould had a sub standing by in Chambasa harbor," Waverly said. And all the occupants of the two cars went to sea."

"But we're the people all a-sea," Illya remarked bitterly. "How do we pick a THRUSH sub out of the Pacific Ocean? Worse than the proverbial needle in the haystack!"

"Yes, quite," Waverly said. "To locate the needle all one would need would be a sufficiently strong magnet. And we haven't anything—except you and me."

TWO

THE THRUSH man who'd taken Napoleon Solo's slug during the skirmish in The Castle courtyard lay like a spider at the center of a web. The skeins were the lines, tubes, and wires connecting various parts of his body to bottles of dextrose, plasma, oxygenator, humming and clocking machines that prodded his lagging life processes.

In surgical gown, cap, and mask, Dr. Ramon de Luz raised his eyes from the stricken man and glanced

about at members of the medical team surrounding the operating table. In each pair of eyes he read corroboration of his own opinion. The prognosis was entirely negative.

A lean, dark, almost saturnine looking man with the first brush of gray in the coal black hair on his temples, de Luz lifted a rubber-gloved hand, yanked his mask below his chin, and told a nurse,

"The men from U.N.C.L.E. will have to see him here, if at all. Please have them put in sterile gowns and brought in—quickly!"

"Yes, doctor."

The nurse's movements were a vanishing whisper. De Luz turned in the brilliant glare of the overhead light, knuckled his kidneys, and arched his back in a stretch against its tiredness. His assistants could do all that remained to be done at the operating table. With artificial means, just keep the flicker of life in its home of bone, blood, and tissue as long as possible.

Working the kinks out of his lean, sloping shoulders, de Luz murmured compliments to each member of the team. They had performed magnificently. Indeed, they had done the impossible, keeping the man on the table alive this long.

De Luz went forward to meet the U.N.C.L.E. men as the nurse ushered them in. They were garbed in green, sterile smocks and caps.

"Gentlemen," de Luz nodded at Waverly and Kuryakin in turn. "I

can sum up the situation in a single sentence. The patient is dying."

Members of the medical team shifted to make room for Waverly and Kuryakin as they rushed to the THRUSH agent's side.

Waverly looked at the gray, hawkish face. In hollow sockets, the eyes already appeared as unseeing as glass marbles.

A flick of Waverly's finger was a signal to Kuryakin.

Illya bent over the dying man, his face directly above the glassy eyes. "Can you hear me?"

A faint tremor in the THRUSH man's lips indicated that he could.

"Do you see me?" Kuryakin asked.

The glassy eyes made faint movement, trying to focus. Illya decided the man was seeing blurred, swirling outlines.

"Make an effort!" Illya commanded. "You know my face quite well. Surely, you recognize your own commander!"

The eyelids flickered.

"Yes," Illya Kuryakin grated in a voice that lacked his usual mel-low tones, "that's right. Dion Gould. Your commander!"

"Yes . . ." the agent whispered dimly.

"Excellent. I'm glad you're not beyond understanding. The raid on The Castle is over. We were successful. You did excellent work. I commend you."

"The Castle . . . Operation—Boy Scout—"

"Precisely," Illya said. "And the U.N.C.L.E. agent who fired on you, who wounded you, has been caught. Quick execution is too good for the swine."

"Yes . . ." the gray lips formed almost silent words. "Swine—shot me—"

"As your commander, I deem it fitting for you to determine his fate. The privilege of revenge is yours, my brave comrade!"

A final glint of life flared in the marble eyes. The gray lips twisted. Inspired by the thought of revenge, the THRUSH man's brain battled for a few more seconds of life.

Bending over the table, Illya's body was so tense that a cramp dug into his belly. The nails of his clenched hands almost brought blood from his palms.

"We shall make him pay dearly for what he has done to you," Illya said. "We shall kill him as slowly as you wish."

"Yes! Swine. Kill slowly—"

"Shall we take him to the base?"

"Yes. Base—on board. Tell the swine for me—" A rattle deep in the throat cut off the venomous words.

Illya Kuryakin flicked a desperate question with his eyes at Dr. de Luz. De Luz made an answer with a single slow shake of his head. No mechanical device, no additional drugs could any longer forestall what was happening on the table.

Illya's face was inches from the dying man's. "Speak up!" Kurya-



kin commanded. "THRUSH wants to carry out your every wish in this matter. But you'll have to speak up. Where is it you want the U.N.-C.L.E. swine taken?"

"Base. Benevolence. Please tell him—"

"Yes? Quickly! Explain it to me!"

The glassy eyes stared straight into Kurayakin's. The muscles in his squarish jaws bunched. A shiver shot across his shoulders. He straightened slowly, one by one his muscles twitching to normal looseness.

"Sorry," said de Luz, "we did everything we could."

"We are grateful, doctor," Waverly said. "And perhaps your best was good enough."

Illya shot his chief a look.

Waverly gave one of his rare, dry, humorless smiles. "No, Mr. Kuryakin, my mind has not suddenly snapped under the pressure of our work. You wormed two quite significant bits of information out of our deceased friend."

"I caught nothing in what he said," de Luz said with a frown.

"Nevertheless, Mr. Kuryakin handled the interrogation perfectly. I am sure he roused the deceased to a final lucid moment with the hunger for revenge. The first revelation consisted of two words he used. Quote . . . on board . . . end quote. What does that indicate to you, Mr. Kuryakin?"

"A ship," Illya said. "What else? Where does one go on board, except a ship?"

"Exactly. And what could be more convenient for a strike at The Castle than a floating base?" Waverly strolled to the table and looked at the hawkish face now frozen in death. "The second clue was a single word. Benevolence."

"Sounds like he went delirious during his last gasp of life," Illya said. "It's impossible that a THRUSH agent, brain-washed and psychologically conditioned as they are, would request benevolence for an enemy."

"Out of the realm of plausibility," Waverly agreed. "But neither was the fellow delirious."

Dr. de Luz suddenly snapped his fingers. "Benevolence . . . Of course! Right in my own field of medicine!"

"Yes, doctor," Waverly said drily, "it's nice to have you close the gap between us."

Illya Kuryakin himself was putting the equation together, the word

association triggering the recall of a news story several months old.

"You're speaking of one of those hospital ships that makes port and dispenses free medical aid in the backward areas of the world," he decided.

"Ah, you are also with us, Mr. Kuryakin," Waverly said. "You are correct, of course. The *Benevolence* was outfitted, dedicated with a flourishing ceremony, and sent on her way as a supposed vessel of mercy and good will from San Francisco. Right, doctor?"

De Luz nodded. "About six months ago. Since the *Benevolence* left a western port for a reported Pacific voyage, I did in fact cable an offer to be of any possible auxiliary assistance if the ship came into this area. Several doctors of my acquaintance did likewise. These hospital ships count on the aid of local medical people, you know."

"I wouldn't be surprised if the *Benevolence* is in this general area right now," Waverly said, "but I doubt that you or any other outsider would be permitted aboard."

"Who sponsored the *Benevolence*, footed the bills?" Illya asked.

"A group of private philanthropists," Dr. de Luz said.

"Which we may safely assume," Waverly added, "was nothing more than a very clever THRUSH front organization. Think of the laboratory that could be set up in the vastness of a vessel only slightly smaller than the Queen Mary. What

an advantage to have such a base freely roaming the oceans' wastes!"

"And think of the perversion," de Luz said tightly. "Think of the disease-ridden children for whom a mercy ship will never pay a call."

"A grim prospect, doctor," Waverly agreed, "but nothing in comparison to the prospect that faces all the children of the world unless we locate that ship—locate it in time. Locate it and put the proper price tag on the job ahead."

"Price tag?" de Luz murmured. "What price, Mr. Waverly?"

"Our usual," Waverly said. "Our lives."

THREE

IN AN old-fashioned but elegant room in the Hotel Amernacionale in downtown Lima, Illya Kuryakin slept.

He slept not because he had wanted to sleep. He'd willed himself to sleep because it was, in this instance, his duty. One replenished one's physical and mental reserves when opportunity offered, or one paid dearly for the neglect.

He was, at the moment, the weapon held in the scabbard until the face of the enemy could be seen. He slept because he did not know when he would be able to sleep again in the hours and days, perhaps, ahead. Sleep was the dark whetstone, honing the weapon to razor-edge . . .

While he slept, U.N.C.L.E.'s

nerves and muscles pulsed, flexed, and vibrated throughout the earth.

Alexander Waverly had spoken the order into a communicator here in Lima. With the speed of light, the order had flashed from one control center to another throughout the network.

The order was simple and offered no alternates: "Find the hospital ship *Benevolence* and report its position to Alexander Waverly in Lima, Peru. Top secret operation."

As a result of the order search planes jetted into the skies; a nuclear sub in the southeastern Pacific went to full speed and turned its radar sweep to maximum power; around the world, monitors of U.N.C.L.E.'s orbiting spy-in-the-sky satellites went on red alert; on a vast, translucent chart of the world's shipping lanes in New York's central control young and pert female U.N.C.L.E. technicians checked off all legal passenger and cargo ships as they were identified; computers began investing information pertinent to shipping throughout the world, ships in port, in drydock, ships at sea, ships clearing port, putting in, taking on supplies.

And Illya Kuryakin was privileged to sleep for four hours and thirty-two minutes.

Waverly came into the hotel room with a large rolled chart carried under his arm. He removed his key, closed the door, dropped

the night chain in place, and crossed to the bed.

He let his brows rise and fall as he regarded the sleeping figure. Envidable, this ability the younger agents possessed to turn themselves off and on.

"Mr. Kuryakin," Waverly said quietly.

Illya's eyes snapped open. He was instantly alert. He sat up, dropped his feet to the floor, a blink or two and a quick stretching of his arms the only indications that he'd been awakened from a nap.

He stood up, glancing at Waverly. He didn't need to ask if the search was over. He glanced at his wrist chronometer and decided the search had actually taken about an hour longer than he'd anticipated at first.

"Where is the *Benevolence*?"

For answer, Alexander Waverly bent over the bed and unrolled the chart.

"At about this point,, Mr. Kuryakin."

"Off the coast, southwest of Chambasa."

"Yes."

"Moving which way?"

"Southeasterly." Waverly's forefinger traced across the chart. "She may be heading for this area. Primitive, unsettled. Wild terrain. The cliffs drop almost into the sea itself. Probably some natural, fairly deep water harbors, similar to fjords."

"She could slip into any one of them and hide."

"I fear that is a possibility," Waverly said. "But I fear another more. That floating laboratory will be first-class, you can believe that. They might have already gotten from Princess Andra all the information they need."

"How'd we spot the *Benevolence*?"

"Satellite discovered her far off normal shipping lanes," Waverly said. "Fortunately, we had a sub in the area. It went in to sneak a look. It's the *Benevolence*, all right. No doubt at all of it."

"Does she know she's been tracked?"

"We think not," Waverly said. "They have no way of knowing that the agent cut down by Mr. Solo survived long enough to tell us anything."

"Then they don't know we've penetrated the disguise. To the rest of the world, they believe, the *Benevolence* is still a vessel of mercy."

"I pray you are correct, Mr. Kuryakin, in your assessment of their state of false security. It's the one spin favorable to us from the beginning."

Waverly straightened, rolling up the chart. "We will 'copter you out to the sub. The sub will slip you in close to the *Benevolence*—if she drops anchor in one of those hidden, natural harbors. The rest will be up to you."

Illya started to speak, but Waverly placed his fingertips on his chest. The shadows in the room seemed to flow across Waverly's face. The loose flesh under his eyes sagged.

"Mr. Kuryakin, beseech the fates that you shall really be going into the tiger's den!"

Illya nodded. The same thing had been on his own mind. If the deduction they'd drawn was wrong, if the *Benevolence* were actually a mercy ship, there wouldn't be time to make a second guess.

None of his feelings showed on his face. He flipped the corners of his mouth in a smile. "I'm skipping brunch, you know. Or is it dinner? How's the chow aboard that sub?"

"The captain is German, the first officer Italian, but you are in luck, Mr. Kuryakin. The cuisine is French."

ACT FOUR

LET THEM EAT CROW

NAPOLEON SOLO struggled endlessly in a bottomless blackness. Weird lights shot through the darkness now and then, dazzling and blinding him. Strange glowing gargoyle faces reared before him. Scaly, taloned hands reached for him. He screamed silent screams, twisting and whipping himself from the hands.

Such were the effects of the nerve gas that had knocked him



unconscious in the courtyard of The Castle.

After a timeless interval, the blackness faded to a luminous pearl-gray. The gray lightened.

Napoleon Solo cracked his eyelids. A harsh white light scalded his eyes. He lay quiescent, a throbbing pain lancing between his temples as his brain struggled back to reality.

Gradually, his eyes adjusted as his senses cleared. He was lying on a hard, narrow mattress. The fingers of his right hand inched away from his side in exploration, contacted a smooth metal plate. He felt the faint vibration of powerful engines that churned somewhere in the distance.

Turning his head, he opened his eyes all the way. He was lying on a bunk bed in a small room. He felt the steady, even motion of his surroundings.

A ship, he thought. He was on a ship. A ship plying which ocean? And where was Princess Andra?

The urgency of his situation drove the last of the fog from his mind. He swung his feet to the floor and stood up. The nightmare conflict with the gargoyles induced by the nerve gas had left him a trifle weak. He gave his knees a moment to firm up; then he searched his clothing, the quick motions of his hands determining that he had been relieved of all weapons.

He began an exploratory circuit of his quarters. The room had neither door nor porthole. Fresh air was fed through a slitted grille of an air-conditioning duct. One of the white enameled panels must constitute a sliding door.

He began looking for a latch, trigger, or button, moving slowly along the wall. The assumption started crystallizing in his mind that the room was actually what it appeared to be.

A barren cell designed for forcible confinement, openable only from the outside.

"Did you have pleasant dreams, Mr. Solo?"

Solo spun. Across the room a panel had slid open. The aperture framed a sinuously beautiful blonde, electrifying in a skin tight sheathing of black material that glistened in the harsh light.

"Not very," Napoleon Solo admitted. His brow quirked as his eyes swept over her in frank, mas-

culine appraisal. "But I've a hunch the gargoyles in the nightmare were much less deadly than the lovely images of reality."

She gave a husky laugh as she stepped into the room. "Danger exists, Mr. Solo, only when one is on the wrong team."

"Did you ever hear of an U.N.-C.L.E. selling out?"

"Of course not. But aren't you assuming your side has something left to sell?"

The cool, lovely face before him was touched with a remote smile. Solo felt a wash of ice across his forehead.

"What," he said levelly, "has happened while I was knocked out?"

"You and the princess were removed to this ship, the *Benevolence*."

"*Benevolence*? The name strikes a chord. Of course—one of those hospital ships!"

"An excellent front, don't you think?" She reached and traced his chin with a forefinger. "Who would ever think of a bunch of THRUSH meanies launching their exciting little forays from a hospital ship?"

"Practically no one," Solo nodded. "An unsuspected base, welcome in the water of any nation, movable at will—and plenty of room for a command complex and laboratory."

"You see the advantages quickly, Mr. Solo."

"And the princess?"

"Given the best our very excellent laboratory has to offer."

Solo made a blind, threatening move of despair. Marlene Reine stepped back quickly. Two hot-togged THRUSH men eeled inside the room.

Marlene wagged a finger, a maddening, arrogant smile on her red lips. "You wouldn't raise a hand against a lady, would you?"

Napoleon Solo stood rigid in the center of the cabin, his hands clenching at his sides. "Have you—destroyed Princess Andra?"

"Perish the thought! Why bother to destroy what has become useless and no longer stands in our way?"

"Then you've gotten it from her, the results of all her work. You know how to harvest and process plankton from the sea for human consumption."

"We know every detail of her research, Mr. Solo. A little remains to be done. She'd planned to turn the whole thing over to a neutral international body when her project was complete. But with everything we now have, our own scientists can proceed and tie up the few remaining loose ends even more quickly than the princess working alone. We are ready to strike, Mr. Solo!"

Napoleon Solo sensed that she'd spoken a flat truth. The knowledge was stupefying.

Her laugh spilled into the cabin. The perfection of her surface beauty remained, but she was unlovely

as a person, gloating, greedy, and vicious.

"How nice to see a vaunted U.N.C.L.E. man sweat, Mr. Solo! But you haven't begun to taste failure yet! We have a pair of missiles tucked away nicely on pads secretly set up in an extinct Andean volcano, the old giant the superstitious natives called Iaclasco.

"As we talk jet 'copters have dropped in the last of the materials. Those missiles are just about ready to fire, Mr. Solo, and set the stage with a fall-out rain of Doulou Particles. Rather fitting that the cataclysm spew out of the old volcano, don't you think?"

Napoleon Solo managed to moisten his throat with a painful swallow. "And by the time the Doulou Particles have destroyed the grain crops, you'll be ready with Princess Andra's process to dole out food to a world in chains."

"You put it too crudely. Why not just say that the arms of THRUSH will welcome all who wish to come into the fold?" She regarded him with tigerish interest. "Even you, Napoleon Solo, if you are sensible and accept the new rules that will govern a new world."

He patted his waistline.

"I really should go on a bit of a diet," he said with a flippishness he was far from feeling. "So don't count on me when you feast on plankton."

"We'll see," she promised grimly. "Meanwhile, let's have the prin-

cess herself corroborate what I've told you."

Marlene slipped aside and signaled the two THRUSH guards with a languid gesture. They strode across the cabin, flanking Napoleon Solo.

"I get the hint," Solo said. He broke his body in a short, mocking bow and extended his hand. "Lead on."

She led the way down a rubber-tiled passageway, Solo behind her, the two burly THRUSH guards bringing up the rear.

Solo felt a subtle change come to the ship. He couldn't pin it down. Then he realized the engines had stopped.

"You're dropping anchor," he muttered.

Marlene Reine glanced over her shoulder. "You're very observant, Mr. Solo."

He glanced at the blank walls and ceiling of the corridor. "Do you mind telling me where we are?"

"At the end of the journey, Napoleon. We've anchored in a small natural harbor hidden by the cliffs south of Chambasa."

She nodded. "We sit tight briefly—until we get the signal that everything is ready on the pads in the crater of good old Iaclasco. Then—" She waved her hand airily over her head as she walked with long, lithe strides—"Dion Gould, the dear boy, gives the order to fire. Up swoosh the lovely missiles, one in a northerly trajectory, the

other southward. At an altitude of about six hundred miles over the poles they explode.

"Once the launch button is pressed nothing can stop the end result. The Doulou Particle fallout will filter down around the world. The coolie in Thailand and the farmer in Iowa, each in a few weeks sees the same results in his fields."

Mental images of the rest of it flamed through Solo's mind. Low-ing cattle dying in sterile pastures. Men, driven out of their minds from hunger, looting, smashing, killing. Men hiding like wild-eyed jungle beasts in their lairs to gnaw the bones of their fellows . . .

Then a well-fed THRUSH hammering out of the chaos the unholy image that it desired . . .

A touch of madness came to Solo's own eyes as he regarded the moving figure before him. Would it be possible to make a quick lunge, grab her, use her as shield between him and the guards in the narrow corridor?

His muscles tensed for the suicidal gamble. His eyes focused on her right shoulder. He readied for the primary judo contact.

Then the small shoulder tab on her garment seemed to magnify in his gaze, as if a telescopic lens had brought the image within inches of his eyes.

His glance flicked over her, seeing her anew. The metallic quality of the garment that covered her from ankles to wrists struck him.

He knew suddenly that she was wearing a feminine version of hot togs. Probably had designed the outfit herself, chosen the color.

All she had to do was flip that shoulder tab and to touch her meant sudden death.

Solo didn't fear death, not if it had purpose. But useless waste of life was quite another matter.

"In here, Napoleon darling."

The lilting mockery of her words jarred into his thoughts. She had opened a door at the end of the companionway and stepped inside.

Solo paused in the doorway. A sumptuous lounge lay before him. Soft, indirect light diffused over massive couches and chairs that looked as soft as the touch of a feather. Dark draperies laced with threads of gold spilled down the walls from ceiling to the white carpet that covered the floor like a layer of foam.

Reclining Roman style on piles of thick pillows beside a low oriental style table were Dion Gould and the princess.

Solo entered slowly, aware of the guards at his back.

Gould bounded to his feet, tossing a napkin on the table which held the remains of a repast that had ranged from caviar to pheasant under glass.

"Too bad you didn't snap out of it in time to join us, Solo. Most condemned men try to be on hand for their last meal!"

Solo ignored the crack. He

looked across the table at Princess Andra. She was pale, wan, and the degree of remorse and guilt in her large dark eyes caused Napoleon Solo to wince.

"Our galley contains tidbits from every continent," Gould said, following Solo's gaze, "but I can't tempt her to eat a morsel."

The princess pushed herself to her knees. "Mr. Solo—"

"I understand," he said gently. "You don't have to explain. I imagine they used truth drugs to wring the secret of the plankton process out of you."

"Only the most powerful," Gould said with a smile. "She resisted beyond the point of being human, but the drug proved most efficient."

Solo indulged himself the luxury of contempt as he looked at Dion Gould. The man's superficial resemblance to Illya Kuryakin was uncanny—but how much difference there was between the two men!

Solo brushed by Gould, reaching as if to offer the princess assistance to her feet.

As he bent toward Princess Andra, Solo's body whipped in sudden, blinding motion. His fingers snatched a grease-smeared carving knife from the dining table. He brought his shoulders around, firing them at Gould's legs. There was no danger in making physical contact with Gould, since he wasn't wearing hot togs. With a knife at his throat, the THRUSH commander would

serve as a one-way ticket out of here.

The shock of surprise held Gould motionless for the barest fracture in time that Solo was counting on. Gould yelped and tried to spin aside as Napoleon Solo's weight struck him just above the knees.

Their bodies made impact on the frothy carpet in a writhing tangle. Gould kicked, jabbed with an elbow, trying to roll away. The two THRUSH guards bounded forward, but struck an invisible barrier of uncertainty.

They could not bring a weapon to bear on Solo without danger to their commander. Neither could they risk contact with their hot togs because of Solo's contact with Gould.

Gould was a wriggling, gouging mass of wiry sinew. Solo took a knee in the groin, the rap of knuckles on his mouth.

Then he caught Gould's wildly swinging fist with his left hand, flopped his weight backward, putting smashing power into the effort as he flipped the THRUSH leader's body and brought the arm up hard behind his back.

Gould screamed softly. He arched his back, trying to jerk himself free. Solo yanked hard on the knife to disentangle it from the carpet.

Another second now and he'd have Gould pinned, the knife at his throat—

"You've gone quite far enough, Napoleon darling!"

Shoulders raised a few inches, his weight bearing down on Gould, Solo flipped a glance over his shoulder.

Marlene Reine stood poised to fling herself against Princess Andra. Marlene had one hand raised to the tab on the shoulder of her skin tight hot togs.

"Release him, dear boy, or witness Andra's electrocution!"

Princess Andra had sprung to her feet. "No, Mr. Solo! Escape—warn them!"

The princess darted backward, but Marlene matched the movement.

The corner of the room shut off further retreat for the princess. She was hemmed in.

"All right," Solo said with quiet acceptance of the situation. "Hold it."

He opened his sweating hand. Gould leaped to his feet, working his arm to ease the pain. The two guards pounced on Solo and jerked him upright.

One of them ripped the knife from Solo's hand. The other glanced at his commander with eyes that were evilly gloating.

"How about we turn on the suits, Commander, and give this U.N.-C.L.E.'s nephew a nice, friendly bear hug?"

"Not yet," Gould said. "You, Karistan, take the two of them to A-three and stay on guard outside

the door. I want them handy to the upper deck when we get the ready signal from the Iaclasco unit.

"I want the pleasure of knowing they've had to swallow the final bitter pill. From the upper deck they'll be able to see a couple of shooting stars moving in reverse—our missiles on their way to points zero!"

Gould smoothed the wrinkles from his disarrayed slacks and turtleneck with quick flicks of his hands. He smiled thinly. "Afterwards, we'll have a little game on the upper deck. We'll let Solo and the Aztec queen see how long they can dodge around in a closing circle of guards in hot togs!"

TWO

ILLYA KURYAKIN came out of the total blackness of the sea into the blackness of a night jeweled with a million stars.

His frogman's suit gave him the look of a glistening seal. He had left one of the locks of the U.N.-C.L.E. submarine *Dolphin* twenty-five minutes ago. Although he could not see the vessel, he knew the *Dolphin* was behind him, due west, lying off the natural harbor just under the surface.

Ahead, against the backdrop of the forbidding palisades that towered up where the sea ended, the *Benevolence* lay at anchor. She was totally blacked out, but Kuryakin could guess at the beehive of

life going on behind the covered portholes.

He settled his air tanks a bit more comfortably on his back, finished taking his bearings, and slid again beneath the surface.

Five minutes later his face mask, in the feeble night glow, was a faint glint bobbing beside the anchor chain that snaked down from its port in the prow of the ship.

A gentle in-coming tide was running, and he let it steady his body against the giant chain links. From the plastic case strapped against his chest, Kuryakin removed what appeared to be a flat round tin with a foot-long tube projecting from its edge.

He lifted the tube skyward, aimed, and depressed a button. With a whirl from the released energy from a coiled spring, a metal rod shot out of the tube, dragging in its wake a nylon line.

As the rod limned against the starry sky, it sprang open into three prongs.

Kurayakin watched the line quiver against the sky as it played out of the metal drum in his hand. He saw it sweep over the deckrail of the *Benevolence*. He jerked his finger from the depressed button. The extended metal prongs hit the end of the line and fell on the deck, out of sight.

Kuryakin crouched in the water beside the anchor chain, eyes and ears straining. But nothing happened above to indicate that the

soft bump of the nylon-sheathed prongs had attracted attention.

He pulled the line slowly, felt the pronged hook snag on the deckrail. He put pressure on the line to test it. The hook was caught securely.

He shrugged out of his tanks and face mask to lighten his weight. Then he began the slow, difficult, hand-over-hand ascent to the deck of the *Benevolence*.

The edge of the deck was finally at eye level. It was quiet, deserted. Then Illya ducked as a THRUSH guard came into view.

Illya's muscles began to cramp. The line felt as if it were cutting in the very bones of his hands. The dark water below rustled hungrily.

Then the THRUSH man's footsteps faded, going aft in a pace that was leisurely in the total absence of any visible sign of danger.

Illya's frogman suit squeaked softly as he slithered onto the deck. He slipped out of the suit quickly, removing sneakers from the plastic case. Sitting on the deck, he donned the shoes and stood up clothed in the slacks and turtleneck he'd worn beneath the underwater suit.

With deft motions, he folded the frogman suit into a small bundle and slid it in the shadows of a hatch cover.

Then he was a shadow flitting across the deck. He reached a door on the side deck, took a breath, hesitated. But, he supposed, any door that one must open onto the unknown was as good a bet as any

other. With that thought, he depressed the handle and eased the door open.

He slipped into a companion-way that glowed with diffused light. It ran aft. It was deserted at the moment, but from an open room off the corridor up ahead came the clicking of poker chips, an occasional curse or guffaw. A rec room, Kuryakin decided, where standby guards were gambling.

Kuryakin took a breath and continued along the passageway. The open portal of the recreation room was to his left. As he reached it, he flicked a glance inside. Five men, as he'd surmised, were huddled about a card table.

One of them glanced up and saw him. The man bumped the table as he snapped to attention. "Commander! Is something wrong?"

The human impulse to bolt surged up in Illya. But he broke stride casually, shook his head, and with a gesture of his hand indicated the guards might go on with their game.

The guard began to reseat himself slowly, staring at the likeness of his chief out there in the corridor. Illya's pulse skipped a beat. Something was wrong. But with easy, unhurried motion, he continued on his way.

The open doorway of the rec room fell eight, ten, twelve paces behind. Illya eased out his breath. He'd counted on his superficial likeness to Dion Gould as an ace in

the hole. Apparently luck was with him.

Then from behind him came the voice of the guard who'd first noticed him. "Commander!"

Illya's shoulders chilled. He stopped, turned with a smooth motion.

He coughed, lifted his hand, and in the midst of a second cough, mumbled a muffled, "Yes? What is it?"

"How did you get up here so quickly, Commander? You called us from D-twenty just moments ago and told us to be prepared to take Solo and the princess on the main deck when we get the signal from Iaclasco that—"

The **THRUSH** man's words broke off in an explosion of breath.

Illya felt his body go nerveless. He suspected what he would see if he turned from the guard and followed the direction of the guard's gaze.

And he was quite correct. A small elevator had whined to a stop far down the corridor. And Dion Gould had stepped out, flanked by three more of his hot-togged thugs.

THREE

THE CABIN to which Gould had consigned Napoleon Solo and Princess Andra was much more like a stateroom than the cell in which Sol had shaken off the effects of the nerve gas.

It was a bed-sitting room with

comfortable modern furnishings. But it was also an interior cabin without a porthole. It was air-conditioned and offered no exit except the door, outside of which a THRUSH man was stationed. So it was, in effect, as secure as Solo's previous cell.

Princess Andra was pale and calm. She had accepted the fact of death and faced it without melodramatic display.

She sat regally erect in a chair covered with white satin, the clutching of her fingers on the arms of the chair the only sign of her inner feelings.

She watched Solo as he prowled the room. He started. He stopped. He touched various objects. And her eyes were pained as she read the tension in him.

She gave a shake of her head, swirling the glistening black hair about her shoulders, and dropped her gaze to the carpet.

"Strangely enough, Mr. Solo, I can't even recall my previous state of mind. When my father was butchered, I blamed politics. Politics had killed him. And I saw his death as worse than wasteful. The human race had deprived itself of a man who was not only brilliant—but who was genuinely good. So I would have nothing to do with politics or political factions . . ."

Her words broke in a bitter laugh. "I would never permit my discoveries, designed for the hungry, to be used in a game of power



politics. When the final detail of the process was complete, I would give it to all nations—"

Her nails ripped into the white satin. The suffering in her eyes deepened intolerably. "I made the common mistake of so many so-called intellectuals. I thought it possible to pretend there was no evil or good, merely truth. I believed in neutrality. And blindly went ahead to the inevitable result, put myself and my work in the hands of those who—"

Her words trailed off. Her eyes came into bewildered focus on Solo, as the strangeness of his actions got through the barricade of her own thoughts.

He had dashed across the room, jerked the wire from a bedside lamp. Now he was nibbling the end of the wire, baring the copper strands.

He caught the look on her face and smiled tightly.

"No," he murmured, "the imminence of death hasn't caused me to flip. It merely occurs to me that we might have some slight chance of getting out of here!"

She didn't understand, but his words brought her to her feet. She watched as he took hold of the bare copper and peeled the wire from its sheathing of insulation. The naked wire was about six feet long. He rolled about three feet of it into a hard, small ball of copper.

He stood now with three feet of wire that was weighted on its end.

"As the old saying goes, princess, we've nothing to lose but our lives. Game to chance a gamble in which we have no more stakes?"

"Certainly, Mr. Solo. But I don't understand—"

"You just get that guard to open the door and step inside. Then I'll either grab us a fighting chance or kill us quickly."

She looked toward the closed door. "Pretend I'm suddenly ill? But no—"

"But no," Solo agreed, looking steadily at her. "He wouldn't open the door for that. But he would certainly jump at the chance of buttering up his commander."

Her eyes questioned.

Solo crossed to her side and spoke quickly in low tones. "These birds think in one direction. Intrigue. Double dealing. Unholy bargains they can welch on later. So we feed him some food for thought. Rather, you do."

"Yes, Mr. Solo?"

"You tell him there's one additional and vital piece of information about your process you managed to hold back. You tell him you'll trade it for your life. Not both of ours. Just yours. He'll comprehend and believe it if he thinks you're ready to sell me out, do anything to save just your own skin."

"All right," she said, "I'm ready, Mr. Solo."

Napoleon Solo moved away from her, taking a position not too close to the door. He would be in full view of the guard if the door should open, and apparently harmless. He lifted his hands behind his head, holding the end of the weighted naked wire in his right hand. The wire dangled down his back, his body concealing the wire as he faced the door.

He nodded at Princess Andra. His heart felt as if it were fluttering in his throat. "On stage, my lady," he murmured.

She took a moment to compose herself, to project herself into the role of a person slaving with fear of death.

She moved to the enameled metal portal, sagged against it, her nails grating on its surface.

"Guard! Guard, please!"

"Keep quiet in there!"

She moaned. "I don't want to die. Please don't let me die!"

"So it's getting to you!" The guard's voice brightened with pleasure.

"I won't go on keeping it to myself." Princess Andra looked at Solo for approval and got it from a quick wink of his right eye.

The guard let a moment pass. Then his voice came as if his lips were almost against the other side of the door. "Keeping what to yourself?"

"One thing." She began giving an excellent imitation of ragged sobs. "I was able to hold it back—One vital thing. But dying isn't worth it. If I told you, on condition that you help me—"

"I might speak to the commander," the guard said gruffly.

"Yes, yes! Please—think how generous he would feel toward you if you could go to him and reveal the one thing I was able to hold back. You could influence him. For my sake—"

Princess Andra let her voice fade. She moved back and crumpled on the carpet in the middle of the room.

Good girl! Solo thought.

"You lousy female fink!" Solo snarled. "I'll fix you so you'll never tell anybody—"

"Lay off, Solo!" the guard rasped through the door. "Stand clear and put your hands behind your head! I'm having a look, and if you've got a finger on her, I'll blast you."

The latch was rattling, the door cracking cautiously. The sight that met the THRUSH man posed no threat to him, but it was not altogether reassuring. He saw Solo

standing abjectly, hands behind his head as ordered. He saw the form of the princess several feet away, apparently unconscious.

The THRUSH man came cautiously into the room, "If you've silenced her for keeps, you just don't know how dearly you're going to buy your own demise!"

The guard reached to his shoulder and flipped the hot togs control on full power. A grin slit his face. "I almost hope you make a move, U.N.C.L.E.'s boy, and manage to grab a handful of my shirt-tail!"

Solo stood merely quivering, looking meekly impressed. The guard cautiously skirted him, watching him closely.

Then the guard made his inevitable mistake. He took a quick look at Princess Andra to make sure she was still breathing.

Solo's right hand came from behind his head. His arm snapped around. The guard jerked his head just as the weighted end of the wire whipped in a single coil about his neck. He yanked his pistol up to fire. But he had time only to half-way complete the motion.

The loose end of the wire brushed against his hot togs. A crackle of bluish-white flame welded the wire to the suit as the full power flowed from the hot togs into the guard's un-insulated neck.

Solo had flung himself to one side as the pistol had started its jerky motion. He had but a glimpse

of the guard straining on tiptoe, eyes bursting from their sockets, face turning black.

The glimpse was enough to give him nightmares for several nights to come.

Catching his breath against the sudden odor of scorched ozone and frying flesh, Solo scooped up the guard's fallen pistol. Princess Andra was already scrambling through the open doorway.

Solo joined her in the corridor, yanking the door closed. From a distance a sound emanated. A whine. Like the whispered echo of an elevator rising to an upper level on the other side of the ship. But corridors on the other side didn't concern Solo at the moment, not as long as this particular passageway was empty.

He grabbed Andra's hand and they ran to the corridor's end. Solo cracked a door, peeked out, then motioned to the princess.

They raced across the dark foredeck, toward the prow. The shadow of a hatch loomed. Solo cut around it. His feet caught in something soft and yielding. He tripped and fell.

The princess heard his grunt, drew up, and returned to his side, dropping to her knees.

"Are you all right, Mr. Solo?"

"Yes," he gasped, sitting up. He began disentangling his feet from the wet, rubbery substance.

"Frogman's outfit," he said. "Still wet. Wait a minute! Still wet and

hidden here—means somebody must have sneaked aboard."

He spread the suit flat on the deck with quick movements of his hands.

His breath grabbed tight. On the left breast of the suit, he could make out the outlines of the imprinted insignia of a triangular U.N.C.L.E. badge.

His body jerked into a crouch. He caught Andra's arm.

"Over the side you go," he ordered. "I hope you swim well."

"I won medals in college," she said, not boastfully. "But you, Mr. Solo?"

"Our people have uncovered the secret of the *Benevolence* and sent somebody in to assist us. I'm afraid I'll have to linger aboard. But you are the prize, you and the contents of your brain. So don't hesitate. Don't look back. We'll give you every chance possible."

FOUR

ILLYA KURYAKIN had that one moment of grace in which the THRUSH guards were suspended, staring from one image to another of their commander.

The U.N.C.L.E. pistol in Illya's hand coughed. The guard beside Gould grabbed his midsection and crumpled. The others followed their leader as he fell back in confusion into the elevator.

"Get him, you fools!" Gould screamed.

Kuraykin turned just as the first guard from the rec room bore down upon him. He didn't have time to bring his gun to bear. He twisted desperately aside from the THRUSH man's bulk, pitching one of the anti-hot togs jell capsules with a side flip of his hand.

At the close range it was impossible to miss. Illya heard the soft plop of the capsule against the guard's suit even as he tumbled away from the guard's shadow.

He got a blurred impression of the guard straining rigidly upright and smoking like a side of scorched beef as the suit-shorted out.

"They've found a defense and turned the hot togs into death traps," Gould screeched from the elevator. "Don't get close to him—but kill him, kill him!"

And kill me they shall, Illya realized. Caught between two fires, both ends of the corridor plugged with THRUSH guards—

He flopped, skidding on his chest, escaping the first fusillage from the guards pouring out of the rec room. He flipped a shot to drive them back, swiveled his arm to fire in the direction of the elevator.

He flung himself to the other side of the corridor as bullets whined off the enameled steel walls.

He heard a man cry out and knew that a slug from one end of the corridor had hit a man at the other end. Stroke of luck, that.

But he knew the last grain of

luck was about to run out. He had already exceeded his average life span under these circumstances. But he kept moving, firing, making a flat, small target of himself. A bullet burned across his ribs. Another nipped at his shoulder.

Then he had the crazy sensation that Napoleon Solo was calling his name from the far end of the corridor. He swiveled his head. The bodies of two guards from the rec room lay slumped on the floor. And there in the doorway that opened onto the deck stood a figure that looked amazingly like Napoleon Solo—

Solo ducked for cover behind the jamb of the portal as the guns in the elevator lifted toward him. In a crablike run, Kuryakin scrambled for the door and dove through. He hit the deck, rolling. He heard Napoleon slam the door.

He floundered dizzily as Solo grabbed his arm and yanked him to his feet. He wondered how many bullets had picked at him. Time enough later to count the leaks.

"Had a gun taken from a THRUSH guard who got cooked in his own juices," Solo said as they plunged for the railing. "Heard the bang-banging and decided to drop in uninvited."

Kuryakin yelled, "Thanks."

Solo had no reply, for they were over the railing, knifing toward the dark water in long dives.

Solo sliced into the water, turned, surfaced. He treaded, blew water

from his nose, and hissed, "Kur-yakin!"

"Here."

Overhead on the deck of the *Benevolence* feet pounded. From up there in the darkness, Gould yelled, "Lights! Grenades! Quickly! They haven't got a chance, the swine."

A beautifully modulated female voice spoke to Solo from a much closer source, almost at his shoulder.

"This way, Mr. Solo!"

Solo made out the wet face of Princess Andra in the dim night-glow. Her teeth glinted. "I didn't follow your orders very well, Mr. Solo. I hesitated. I looked back. Now take hold of my right ankle with your left hand when I turn. Have your friend link up with you. We mustn't get separated. And should I add that we should all swim as hard as possible?"

"For dear life," Illya sputtered gustily.

"Literally," Solo added.

They linked up, the princess leading and choosing the direction. From the deck of the *Benevolence* came the first probing finger from a spotlight. As it swept near, the human chain in the water slid beneath the surface and kept striving shoreward.

The light searched toward the further end of the harbor, chilled. A gun blasted from the deck of the *Benevolence*.

"You fool," Dion Gould shouted,

"you're firing at a rolling porpoise. Keep that light moving!"

The dark rise of the palisades slipped closer by inches. Three times the fleeing swimmers slipped under the surface as the light threatened them.

Gould's voice was far enough behind to strike the first echo from the water as he shouted a fresh command, "They're ducking under water to avoid the light. Excellent. Keep the light moving. Make them stay under. And bring up the grenades—the big ones! We'll depth-charge the fools!"

Princess Andra's voice drifted back to Solo. "One more time, gentlemen. A charge of oxygen in your lungs now—Here we go!"

They curved into the dark depths, swimming hard, Solo and Illya touching the churning feet ahead of them now and then to stay on track.

Napoleon Solo's lungs began to ache. The first faint ringing started in his ears. On and on . . . were they standing still against a running tide? It felt that way, although he knew the tide was running in, sweeping them forward.

The pain in his lungs became fire. Blue sparks began to dance against the walls of his eyes. Some of the tenseness of waiting for the concussion of a grenade under water had left him. He was too absorbed with the need for air in these Stygian depths.

Then, as his lungs began a con-

vulsive sucking even at the water, his shoulders slammed into the legs of the princess. She had surfaced, was treading water.

Solo shot up beside her. In a moment Kuryakin appeared. Their panting efforts to fill and refill their lungs had a weird tonal quality. An echo.

"We're in a grotto deep in the cliffs," Princess Andra said, her voice bouncing and rebounding off the stone walls of the vast natural chamber. "I've come here often looking for unusual marine specimens, or just for the joy of coming into a place carved by the sea when dinosaurs were young. Come."

As they swam deeper into the vast cave, the first bull boom of the grenade barrage vibrated the water about them.

"This place gets cozier by the minute," Solo remarked, "with those confounded grenades going off out there."

A wan light flared ahead, several feet higher than the water. The princess had pulled herself up onto a ledge.

"I keep a few things here," she explained as Solo and Illya crawled up beside her, "so my visits will not be entirely without the comforts of civilization. Electric torch. Cigarettes. A few tins of tidbits to snack on."

Solo and Kuryakin sat side by side, legs dangling. From this distant reaches of the harbor came the almost continuous roar of booming



grenades flashing their deadly impacts through the water, seeking them out.

"All quite comfortable," Solo said, still short-winded. "But we're stymied. Stuck. No way to stop THRUSH. Bottled up and helpless like—"

"Bottled up, Napoleon," Illya said. "But not helpless."

"No?"

"No. You see, Napoleon, I have a gun."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Big enough to blow a hole in the *Benevolence*?"

"Oh, quite," Kuryakin said. "Big enough to pulverize Mr. Gould, his ship, his mistress, his crew, his entire scheme. I'm speaking of the

submarine *Dolphin*. I came from her to the *Benevolence*. She's standing by just outside the harbor. One of her pea-shooter missiles is zeroed in on the stacks of the *Benevolence*."

"And you have a communicator? You can contact the *Dolphin*?"

"Assuredly. Furthermore, we have a mountain of stone over and about us to protect us," Illya said, rubbing his shoulder gingerly.

"Then give the order to fire! What are you waiting for?"

"I'm getting my breath back," Kuryakin said somewhat nastily. "I'd prefer to sound like an U.N.C.L.E. agent, not a gasping schoolboy, when I converse with the skipper of the *Dolphin*!"

EPILOGUE

MR. ALEXANDER WAVERLY crossed the thick carpeting of a sedate office in New York central control, nodding and shaking hands as Kuryakin and Solo entered.

"Have a good flight home, gentlemen?"

"Routine," Solo shrugged.

"The press reports a tremendous explosion in one of the rock-bound coves south of Chambasa a couple of nights ago," Waverly reflected.

"The very mountain shook," Kuryakin assured him.

"But you two and the princess swam out in due time."

"When the water stopped roiling," Solo said.

Waverly strolled to a magnificent desk of carved hardwood, half sat against its edge. "Now about those missiles in the extinct crater Iaclasco. One of you had better go down as our representative when the Peruvian government dismantles them."

Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin each jerked a thumb at the other and said in one breath, "He will go!"

Mr. Waverly's bushy brows lifted. "Is there something special—a major attraction—in New York at the moment?"

"Well, as a matter of fact—" Solo said.

"—Princess Andra is in town," Illya said.

"— and really deserves an escort to show her around," Solo said. "She . . . uh . . . is waiting in the anteroom."

"Hmmm." Waverly rubbed his chin. He pondered. When he raised his eyes, they held a twinkle. "The problem is easily solved, gentlemen. You both go to Peru."

And while his ace agents stared, Mr. Alexander Waverly strolled out of sight, in the direction of the anteroom.

THE DEADLY BORE

*Who could touch him and live?
One man—and a little bird . . .*

by ARTHUR PORGES



GENERAL HERNANDO ARILA, who was also *Presidente* of San Clemente, a small Central American Republic, was short, blocky, heroically muscled, and set as

solidly on the ground as any pyramid. He smiled very readily, showing large teeth stained by nicotine; but there was just as much mirth in the act as a shark displays on closing in for a kill.

He was a magnificent-looking man, and wore his unique uniform, designed by himself, with a distinct flair. It was blue and gold, with much braid, far flashier than ever the highest ranks of the army could show.

They were restricted to more sombre colors.

In terms of common sense, form-sheet, or even the higher reaches of symbolic logic, only one outcome would seem possible from a clash between General Hernando Fuentes Avila and Professor Bolivar Delgado. The high-velocity collision of a glass fishbowl—cracked—and a cannonball is a fair parallel.

Consider now the professor, who was really a high school teacher of biology. He was small, weedy, ugly, nervous, timid, and undistinguished. He wore the shabby black so dear to the hearts of Latin males.

His one claim to fame was an article in an obscure journal that bore the title: "Reinforcement and Learning." It was merely a rehash, based on experiments, of one of the most well-known principles of animal psychology. Delgado's students were exposed to the article every semester; to get a good grade,

one had only to master it and quote liberally.

It should also be pointed out that while *El Presidente* was brutally direct and laconic, allowing his goons to fill in between the lines with guns, truncheons, and whips, Delgado was intolerably verbose and pompous—in short, a tiresome, stuffy bore.

There was one other significant difference, General Avila was an evil man, head of an oppressive dictatorship, while Delgado, for all his faults, was a person of good will, who wished only for all people to be happy, creative, and—if possible—conversant with his epochal writings.

Even when faced with the searing ridicule of one Dr. Alvarez, of the university, the little man had no desire to lock his critic in a damp cell and disjoint him. Instead, he felt sad, but forgave Alvarez for his envy and malice.

As to the cause of their conflict—the general and the teacher—it was merely the callous murder by Avila's goons of Juan Perez, Delgado's nephew, a boy of only sixteen, gentle, slow-witted, and quite harmless.

Juan was killed as casually as one might crush a snail in the garden, and the teacher, who until then had paid little heed to politics, suddenly had his eyes opened. They were small and watery and not very intelligent, but evil was so large and omnipresent in San

Clemente that even Delgado could now see it bulking clearly before him.

Juan Perez had shouted during one of the Defense Minister's many and rambling harangues. Jumping to a table, the boy had yelled: "Murderers! Where is Colonel Carreno?"

That reference to the legal president, who had disappeared on the occasion of Avila's coup, was a death-warrant. The dictator, sitting to the left of his minister, had merely raised a thick finger, and a member of the elite guard shot Perez through the belly.

He was a long time dying, but got no medical aid either to slow or speed his demise. And none of the thousands listening dared to help him. The rule of fear was absolute in San Clemente.

There was, of course, a resistance—underground—but at present it was like a broken-backed animal, writhing desperately to no avail. Every attempt to assassinate Avila had failed; he was too closely guarded. They were financed, the regime loudly maintained, by the plutocratic, fascist hyenas of the United States.

Delgado set out to contact them. His actions suggested the proverbial blind man seeking a black cat in a lightless cellar at midnight—except that the cat was really there. His blundering, stupid tactics turned out to be his best protection.

It was impossible for even the



secret police to suspect such a bungler. Delgado was short on brains, tact, health, and looks, but had something more vital just now—luck.

Finally, in a sort of half-admiring desperation, and as much to silence the pest before he got more important people in trouble, an executive of the resistance called on the teacher at his hacienda in the remote hills, where such a meeting might pass unnoticed.

When he had obliquely introduced himself, the agent, who went by the name of Senor Nada, demanded, quite irritably, in the name of the Virgin, what Delgado meant by stating all over the country his desire to contact the resistance. Was he tired of life? Did he hope to entrap freedom fighters by such grotesque behavior? What was he up to?

And to his profound astonishment, the shabby teacher said: "I can destroy the Monster for you."

Nada stared at him, controlling his face with an effort.

"Meaning—" he said cautiously.

"*El Presidente!* Who else? The slayer of children; the despoiler of

women; the scourge of our country."

Nada gulped incredulously. Clearly Delgado had no idea what any one of those epithets could earn him in the cellars of police headquarters. The man was so naive and stupid his survival thus far must be accounted a miracle.

"Look," he said gently. "Forget it. Do you know how Avila's guarded always? Armed men throughout the crowd, to fire in a flash at any show of a weapon. Others with binoculars and rifles up high, scrutinizing everybody within range. Planes overhead. And it's known that he wears a bullet-proof garment under that fancy uniform. We've tried, man. We know. There's no possible way, especially for an amateur like you."

"You needn't get involved," Delgado said. "In fact, I want to do it alone—for my nephew, Juan. All I want from your group is some explosive, very strong. Two ounces at most, but of the kind to blow a man's head off if a few inches away. There is such?" he asked anxiously.

Nada cocked his head, intrigued. "There is," he admitted. "Plastic—or RDX from an old mine we found."

"Then just get me a few ounces—say, four."

"And that's all?"

"Not quite," Delgado said. "I—I don't understand such things very well. Could you fix it up in a little

cylinder, no bigger than a cigarette, and with a starter? Something that sets it off when a little wire loop is pulled? That's really all," he added fervently.

"You can't get four ounces in something that small," Nada objected.

"But if the rest were just a few inches away? Would it not go off, too?" the teacher asked, a plea in his voice.

"It certainly would. Sympathetic detonation."

"Then my plan is sound."

"What plan?"

"That is my secret. I shall kill the general," Delgado assured him, his eyes gleaming. "Just bring me what I ask."

It was insane; but Nada made a quick decision. The chief danger, from his point of view, was that Delgado would surely get caught, and tortured until he talked. But the agent was well-disguised, with cheek-pads, false moustache, and more subtle tricks. A description would not help the goons.

So there was nothing to lose but a few ounces of explosive. And maybe the little guy's luck would hold. Nada would play a hunch.

"You'll get the baby bomb," he said. "Never mind how."

"When?"

"Next Wednesday."

"Good," Delgado smiled crookedly. "El Presidente speaks on Saturday. It will be the day of his death."

"I doubt it," Nada said, walking towards the gate. "Do you know what they'll do to you if you're caught?"

"I won't get caught," was the stubborn reply. "I'll be far away."

"They'll torture you, and you'll describe me," Nada said cynically. "But this isn't me, so go ahead. You're a fool, but expendable in these times."

"I'm a scholar," Delgado said. "I wrote an article once—"

But his visitor was gone.

Mumbling irritably, the teacher walked deep into a brushy canyon, and tugged at his scarecrow, crudely made, but wearing an unmistakable military jacket of blue and gold paper.

He pulled it from the ground, and panting, lugged it fifty yards away, there to set the simulacrum up again. A tiresome business, such frequent shifts of position, but absolutely essential. He eyed the grotesque figure musingly, then said in a mournful voice, eyes watering:

"Poor Dulcinea. Why must the innocent suffer so much in this world?"

General Avila's speech on Saturday morning was meant to be brief. As indicated, he was a laconic man, given more to action than words. But in this case, the talk was even shorter than planned. Ten minutes after he started, a large, bluish pigeon, assumed to be one of the many that perpetually circled the plaza, swooped down abruptly to

alight on the dictator's left shoulder.

The moment it landed, the bird tugged with its strong bill at a tiny wire loop fixed along one thigh. The resulting explosion just under his ear killed the tyrant instantly. A few feathers drifted aimlessly over the shrieking crowd. Some of the nearer spectators were speckled with minute drops of blood.

Early Sunday morning Professor Bolivar Delgado turned to Senor Nada. He said: "The technique of reinforcement, which involves immediate and frequent rewards for each step in the required sequence—as I explained fully in my paper, a classic reference in the field, as all know—well, that procedure is particularly effective with pigeons. They have excellent vision, typical of birds, and have even been taught to direct missiles by pecking at a picture of the target on a television screen.

"As I emphasized in my article, a key work in psychology—there should be no false modesty in science, I believe; it is for humanity, after all—but in that report, which took twelve pages, and appeared in a famous journal—"

He would have given a long, rambling, detailed, silly, and largely erroneous lecture on the history and methods of experimental psychology, had not the agent, writhing impatiently, interrupted him.

"But how did you do it? Get that bird to fly to Avila's shoulder?"

"I trained her on a scarecrow

clad in the general's unique uniform. They have fine color vision, pigeons. Like all birds, they —"

"And the fuse?"

"All part of the sequence. She was taught to pull the wire on landing. He must have no time to brush her away. I started her lessons weeks before meeting you, of course. After each performance, she flew back to me for her reward of grain. That is the essence of reinforcement.

"So yesterday I had merely to stay well back from the crowd, around the corner of the Memorial, and flip Dulcinea into the air. She knew what to look for and what to do for her reward."

"And the rest of the explosive?"

where was that? How did you plant it on Avila—but then, you couldn't have done that! The little bomb wasn't enough, obviously, to do the job."

"It was in her crop," Delgado said simply. "I dipped bits of the plastic into damp meal. She loved corn-meal, and was always a greedy bird. She had a very full crop yesterday, *senor*. His eyes were wet. "I weep for poor Dulcinea, an amiable and intelligent bird. But she died well, and in a good cause. In my paper I pointed out that pigeons, as to personality—"

Nada heard no more; he was shaking his head in wonder. The fishbowl had miraculously shattered the cannonball.



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THE OFFICE had been considerably up-dated since the successful affair that literally snatched the Anvil Investigative Agency from the brink of collapse and deposited in the limelight, and consequently, brought paying clients to its door.

With his feet propped on the corner of his new executive desk, Irving Anvil felt more than the simple gratitude of an employer toward a capable employee as he gazed across the room in the direction of Miss Dianne Swann. He was

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well aware that the success of that thorny case had not been his alone. He was even more aware—and this was manifested in a quickening of his pulse as he beheld her—that his interest in Dianne was more than professional.

He drew himself up, sighed, and prepared to set his deductive processes in motion. On the desk before him was a slip of paper, on which, in Dianne's neat hand, was written: *Pierre Delmonico, pres. of Etern-O-Rest Casket Co., phoned while you were out. Caskets mysteriously disappearing. Wants discuss possible quiet investigation.*

This was another of Dianne's

ideas since joining the agency, putting everything pertaining to a case in writing so as to have a complete record.

Anvil pushed the note aside. "Dianne, get this Delmonico on the phone for me, please."

"Right away, Irving."

A tingly feeling fluttered up his spine.

No one before had ever been able to make the name Irving sing the way Dianne did.

She dialed the number, spoke softly into the phone, then nodded. "Mr. Delmonico on the line."

Anvil scooped up his extension. "Just got your message, sir. I— He

clamped his mouth shut and listened for a moment. He consulted his watch. "Be at your office in half an hour? Yes, sir. Right."

He lowered the phone slowly, frowning. "Says he'd rather not talk on the phone. I wonder what that's all about?"

"Maybe he thinks one of his employees is involved and might be listening in."

"That makes sense. You got his address?"

Dianne crossed the office and handed him a slip of paper. "Here it is."

It was at times such as this that Anvil cursed the fate that had stopped his vertical growth at exactly five feet one inch. He gazed into the liquid eyes that hovered some five inches above his own—Dianne had ceased wearing high heels entirely since coming to work for the agency.

"I don't know how I ever managed without you, Dianne," he said, as he reached to take her hands. But with a smile she twisted away.

"You'd better go, Irving. Can't keep Mr. Delmonico waiting."

He said, "Delmoni . . . who? Oh! Him." He crumpled the paper into his pocket, snagged his hat off the tree, and marched out.

Etern-O-Rest Casket Company occupied a large, oddly shaped building on the west side of the city. It was not until he had parked his flashy new fastback and reached the front entrance that Anvil sud-

denly realized the building had been designed in the shape of a gigantic coffin.

"Mr. Anvil to see Mr. Delmonico," he said to the receptionist.

The girl smiled up from filing her nails. "Right through there, Mr. Anvil. He's expecting you."

The detective opened a massive oaken door and entered a room that appeared at first glance to be a sort of chapel. High, stained glass windows filtered an eerie light into the enclosure. The smell, Anvil surmised, had to be incense.

But it was not a chapel. The man who rose from the vast desk to greet him was, conservatively, a foot and a half taller than Anvil, and as the man came around the desk and stopped in front of him, hand extended, the detective found himself gazing upward into two horse-like nostrils.

"I'm Pierre Delmonico," rumbled the organ-toned voice. "Have a seat, Mr. Anvil."

He returned to his own seat behind the desk. "Very peculiar affair we have here. In fact, I can't recall having run into anything remotely like it, and I've been in the business since my youth, and my father before me."

"Have you notified the police about these disappearing coffins?" Anvil inquired.

The bushy black eyebrows rose in alarm. "Good heavens no! Etern-O-Rest is one of the most venerable names in the industry,

Anvil. Notoriety is one thing we prefer doing without. Imagine what a jolly time the tabloids would have with a thing like this!"

Delmonico heaved a sigh. "Now, about these disappearances. They seem to have begun about two months ago. I must confess, our inventory system might not be as precise as it could be, and at first we thought it might simply have been a mistaken count. But three weeks ago it became clear that this was not the case. Thirty-one caskets could not be accounted for. All of them were our king-sized deluxe inner spring model, the Kay Thirty-Seven. This particular casket wholesales at the factory here for four hundred ninety-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents, and of course, is only available to licensed undertakers."

Anvil gave a low whistle. "Over fifteen G's worth of coffins heisted!"

"That was three weeks ago. Our most recent count reveals fifty of them gone." He clasped his hands together on the desktop. "And, sir, if you don't mind, we prefer that our product be called a casket."

The detective shrugged. "You got any idea how these cof—these caskets are being lifted?"

"None whatever. All shipments have arrived intact at their destinations."

Anvil pursed his lips thoughtfully. "I don't suppose it would be easy to sneak a coffin out of here in broad daylight. How about nights?

What's your security setup? Could be somebody like a watchman is in on the racket."

Delmonico shook his head vehemently. "The watchman is my wife's first cousin," he said, as if nepotism and thievery could not mix.

But Anvil had cousins of his own, and he made a mental note of this. He made a new tack. "Why would anyone want to steal coffins? I mean, it don't seem like there'd be much point in stealing the things unless there was somebody that had to be buried."

"Good thinking, Anvil," rumbled Delmonico. "Precisely my point of view. However, the point remains that they have been disappearing, and Etern-O-Rest's board of directors has decided that we need your services."

He pushed his chair back to conclude the interview. "You're to have a free rein. Your secretary has already told me your rates are a hundred dollars a day for each operative used, plus expenses."

Anvil's eyes popped, but he managed a nod. "That's, ah, absolutely correct." He would have to arrange a raise for Dianne. Imagine! Doubling the rates without so much as batting an eye.

WITH THE CONSENT of Pierre Delmonico, Anvil nosed about the factory under the guise of being an inspector from an insurance company. No need in alerting the other

side by broadcasting the fact that he was a private detective. He followed the entire manufacturing process, from sheet metal to finished product, making doodles on a scratch pad as he went.

It was in the warehouse section, where caskets were neatly stacked awaiting shipment, that he really went to work. It had to be from here that the caskets were being pilfered. At least, *logically*, it was from here, for what use would anyone have for an unfinished casket?

He reached the end of a high stack of K37s and suddenly found himself face to face with a burly, scowling individual standing spraddle-legged in the narrow aisle between the stacks.

"All right, Shorty," the man growled, "what's with you?"

Anvil swallowed with some difficulty. "Who—me?"

"I don't see nobody else standing there! What are you doing sneaking around in here, squirt? Come on, let's have it! And it better be good!"

Anvil blurted, "Insurance inspector. Routine check—"

"Oh?" the big fellow said, his eyes slitting suspiciously. "Lots of routine checks lately, ain't there? Seems like it wasn't more'n a week since the last one."

Anvil gulped. "New system. Double check."

"You checking on the other guy, is that it? The regular guy?"

"That's right!" Anvil said, grinning painfully.

"Don't they trust old Clancy no more? He's been with 'em forty years."

"Clancy? Oh, sure, we trust him. It's just—"

The big head bent toward him. "We talking about the same Clancy? Thin guy with a Van Dyke beard? Wears a carnation all the time?"

The big fellow had strategically maneuvered so that Anvil's back was flat against the cold steel of a K-37 casket.

"That's old Clancy, all right—"

Anvil was expecting the worst, and now it came. A ham-sized hand darted out and grabbed his shirt front. "I got him!" the man belted. "I got the guy who's been stealin' 'em! Hey, Joe! Sam! C'mere!"

From somewhere Anvil heard excited voices and the pounding of large feet against the concrete floor. "You don't understand!" he rasped, clawing and twisting violently. "Turn me loose!"

Far down the aisle he saw half a dozen figures round the corner heading in his direction at the gallop. The situation was desperate. Something in Anvil's frantic brain cried out that there was one chance, and with a lightning-like motion, the detective brought both hands upward, edge up, board-stiff.

They smashed into the huge fist balled in his shirt front, there was a crunching sound, and Anvil loosed a piercing scream of pain. Startled,



the big fellow momentarily relaxed his grip, and in that moment Anvil spun, fell, rolled, struck the wall heavily, bounced to his feet, and fled with the speed of an Olympic sprinter.

Half an hour later, as Dianne Swann massaged a soothing balm on his bruised hands, Anvil spoke into the phone cradled between his shoulder and ear.

"No, Mr. Delmonico, that's what I'm trying to tell you. It was *not* the coffin bandit your foreman almost caught. It—it was me. No sir, I realize I shouldn't have run, but it all happened so unexpectedly."

"Irving," Dianne whispered, "tell him we have a plan."

"We—I have a plan, Mr. Delmonico," he said, bafflement clouding his features.

"A secret plan," Dianne prompted, "so as to avoid any leak."

He repeated this, and after a moment of silence Delmonico said, "I'm not so sure I like this secrecy, Anvil. I mean, after all you are working for me."

The tender ministrations of his secretary had lulled Anvil into a sense of extreme well-being, and an accompanying feeling of competency. "You did say I'd have a free

rein, Mr. Delmonico. However, if you'd rather engage some other agency—"

"All right. Just report to me when you have something!" The phone clicked off.

Dianne gazed into her employer's eyes with admiration. "You were magnificent, Irving! Perfectly magnificent!"

He blushed furiously. "Well—" Then his thoughts came back to the immediate problem. "Say, what's this secret plan?"

She dipped tapered fingers into the jar of unguent. "You'll think of something."

By nightfall Anvil had failed to think of something. However, the time had not been spent idly. He had gotten the name of Delmonico's wife's cousin, who was night watchman at the plant, and Dianne had done some leg work checking on him.

The lights of the city were dotting the darkness when Anvil's phone rang.

It was Dianne. "We just might be on to something with this cousin, Irving."

"Oh?" He cocked his feet up on the desk in the manner of Sam Spade. It was well past seven, and he lifted the fifth of rye from the bottom drawer and sat it on the desk. "How's that?"

"His name is Morris. Horace Morris. He's got a fondness for alcohol and every night about midnight he sneaks up the street to a

tavern. He's sweet on one of the girls who works there."

Guiltily Anvil lowered the bottle back into the drawer. "So?"

"So don't you think we should take advantage of his absence and have a private look at some of Etern-O-Rest's records?"

Anvil straightened in the chair. "Yeah! Check out who the customers are and just what was being shipped when the coffins started disappearing!"

"We'll drive out there just before midnight—"

Anvil cut her off. "This is man's work, Dianne. There could be trouble."

"I know. And I'll feel ever so safe, knowing you're there."

"You will?"

"I'll meet you at the office at eleven, we'll go from there. Got to hang up now, there're a few more things about Horace I want to check."

The click cut off any protest on the part of Anvil, and he too hung up the phone. After a moment's hesitation, he once more pulled the fifth of rye from the bottom drawer and poured himself an eye-watering shot.

At precisely a quarter to midnight, under the watchful eyes of Dianne Swann and Irving Anvil, a figure emerged slowly from a side door of the Etern-O-Rest Casket Company. The figure, pot-bellied and khaki-clad, peered cautiously in all directions, then scurried up

the street toward a neon sign announcing a popular brand of beer.

As the figure disappeared, Anvil and his secretary hurried across the street. After trying half a dozen keys in the door, Anvil pushed it open and in they went. The white beam of his flashlight probed the darkness.

"I've got an idea," Irving said. "Let's take a look in Mr. D's office first. I just can't get it out of my head that there's something phony about this whole setup."

"Good idea. Which way is it?"

"As I recollect, it would be to the left."

Moments later Anvil was deftly going through the drawers of Pierre Delmonico's desk, while Dianne kept watch at the door. It wasn't long before Anvil gave out with a low whistle. "What about this!"

"What is it, Irving?"

"This guy's in hot water with some gamblers. Got sort of a diary here telling about his bets, and about certain guys calling him, wanting their money."

"Maybe that explains something I found out. I forgot to tell you. It seems he's been selling off stock for the past year or more. The Delmonico family used to own the whole business. He's sold almost the whole thing now, and he really just works for the company."

Anvil glanced through the papers again. "It adds up. A guy with a compulsive gambling streak hocks the family jewels, still finds

himself in hot water, and—" His voice trailed off. "It comes back to this every time! Why the hell would anybody steal *coffins*?"

"It does seem a bit cumbersome, doesn't it?"

He slammed the center drawer. "Let's check the bookkeeping department and get a line of some of the accounts."

The bookkeeping department was located one floor up and while Dianne went through the ledgers, Irving stood watch in the corridor. Dianne took advantage of a duplicating machine to get the information she wanted, which was a bright idea. The trouble was, the noise of the machine drowned out the heavy thud of footsteps nearly an hour later, and the stairway door opened directly across from Anvil's guard post. He found himself facing the same pot-bellied, khaki-clad character who had left the premises earlier.

The man stared at him, reached up to scratch a shiny bald head, and opened his mouth. "Shay—"

At that moment Dianne emerged from the office, a thick folder tucked under her arm. "Ready, Irv . . . ing . . . oh, oh."

The little man bent forward, as if leaning into a stiff breeze. He looked from Anvil to Dianne, and repeated, "Shay! Who—whacha doin'?"

"It's Horace Morris," Dianne whispered from the corner of her mouth. "Let me handle it."

She stepped forward, smiling brightly. "We're just getting a few things. By the way, how are things going with you and Miss Fogle?"

The suspicion changed to surprise. "Miss Fogle? You a friend of Doris's?" With that, he visibly relaxed and hauled a half pint from his rear pocket, uncorked it, and turned it up. He took a long leisurely gurgling swallow, then wiped a tear from his eye.

"Me an' Doris're through. She saysh it jush wouldn't sound right." He polished off the remainder and with a baleful look at the detective and his secretary, said, "Y'know, she'sh right? 'Magine! Horace an' Doris Morris—"

Dianne nudged her boss. "I think we'd better go, Irving."

ANVIL paced the offices of the agency as daybreak began to lighten the sky to the east. "Plain as the nose on your face, there's where the leak is! Why, with that lush guarding the place at night they could back a train up there and haul off everything in it!"

"But that makes it even more puzzling," Dianne said as she brewed a fresh pot of coffee.

Anvil sifted through the copies of the accounts. "Looks like Gompers Brothers Funeral Home and Jake Morton and Son, Morticians, were both getting a shipment when the disappearances first started. They're up in Mapleton."

"And there was also a shipment

to Heavenly Rest Funeral Parlor in Gainesburg, wasn't there?"

Anvil nodded. "Yeah. That's only about ten miles from Mapleton. That's in Sassafras County. If you were stealing coffins, or anything else for that matter, that'd be the place to take 'em. That sheriff up there's got his finger in every pie there is, from what I hear."

Dianne brought Anvil his coffee. "But why coffins?"

"Yeah, why coffins. It just don't make sense."

"Irving," Dianne said, perching prettily on the corner of the desk. "Take a look at this shipping schedule. There's a big truckload of coffins going up to Gainesburg and Mapleton day after tomorrow. They'll be loading the truck tomorrow afternoon. Now, from the looks of it, there's a possible connection between the disappearances and the time shipments are made to those two places. So—"

Anvil snapped his fingers. "I've got it! Let's stake that truck out and follow it!"

The phone was ringing when they returned to the office following lunch that afternoon. It was Delmonico.

"Anvil, I tried to call you all morning! Thought maybe you were on vacation! How's the case going?"

Dianne, listening on the extension, whispered: "Tell him we're up against a stone wall."

Anvil cleared his throat, and



showing a bit of originality, said, "We're up against a brick wall so far, Mr. Delmonico."

"Well, you keep at it and keep in touch." The phone clicked off.

"He sounded pleased to me," Dianne said.

"I don't think so. Look, if it's Delmonico stealing coffins from himself—"

"From the company," Dianne interrupted. "Remember, there's a difference."

"Well, if he needs dough to pay off gambling debts, he'd have to look a hell of a long time before he'd find a gambler who'd be willing to take coffins for payment!"

"Well, maybe we'll get some answers from this shipment loading this afternoon," Dianne said hopefully.

From a vantage point across the street from Etern-O-Rest Casket Company's loading dock several hours later, Anvil and his secretary watched closely as a huge truck was loaded.

"Thirty-nine . . . forty . . ." Anvil said, as Dianne kept count on a pad. "That's it. They're closing the back of the truck. Forty caskets."

Dianne sighed. "Nothing wrong so far. That's exactly how many the shipping orders called for." She laid the pad aside. "It does seem strange."

"What's strange? They were supposed to load forty, and that's how many they loaded."

"That's not what I meant. It's just a few minutes past five, and it's only a hundred miles or so to Mapleton. Why isn't the truck leaving until tomorrow morning?"

Anvil shook his head. "Nothing funny about that. What would be the point in getting in there at ten or eleven at night?"

"Just the same, Irving, I think we should watch this truck every minute until it leaves."

"Sit here all night!"

She reached across the seat and touched his hand. "It wouldn't be so terrible, would it?"

At midnight Anvil was snoring softly behind the wheel of the fast-back. He was dreaming that he was seven feet ten inches tall, and center for the Celtics, when Dianne shook him awake.

"Look, Irving!" she whispered. "Something's happening!"

Across the way, behind Etern-O-Rest's heavy wire fence, the big truck still stood with its tailgate against the loading dock. A power-

ful floodlight shone down from each corner of the ramp. There was a flicker of movement in the deep shadows close against the building, and Anvil jerked up-right.

Peering against the glare of the lights, he saw that a door had opened at the far end of the dock, and now a head poked out, a hat pulled low over it.

"Don't move, Dianne. Hold still," Anvil said.

After several long moments, the head withdrew.

"Now what the devil was that all about?"

"Look!" Dianne snapped.

The floodlights abruptly went out, leaving the area in total darkness except for the faint glare of a streetlight half a block away. There was the sound of the large freight door being opened, then the clank of the rear doors of the truck being opened.

"They're unloading it!" Anvil said.

"No. Look carefully. They're bringing something out of the building."

"And loading it right into the truck!"

As they peered into the darkness, they were able to make out five distinct trips from building to truck, after which the truck was closed, then the building, and at last, the lights turned on.

"Well," Anvil said with a grin, "we've cracked it, Dianne."

"Have we? We still don't know what it's all about."

"It's simple! They just load a few extra coffins in the trucks at night and—" He scratched his head. "Yeah. I see what you mean."

"One thing is certain. The truck driver has to be in on it."

"That's right!" Anvil said. "Otherwise, he'd be pretty surprised when he found five left over after he made his deliveries!"

"We'd better go, Irving. We're going to need a few hours' sleep."

"A few hours!" the detective chuckled, starting the car. "I'm not budging out of the sack before noon!"

"Oh, yes you are. That truck is supposed to leave at six this morning, and we're going to be right behind it!"

AT EIGHT-THIRTY that morning, a gaunt-eyed Irving Anvil gripped the steering wheel and stared at the rear of the Etern-O-Rest Casket Company truck, just as he had been doing for the past two and a half hours. Silently, he was cursing the day he had first read the correspondence school ad telling of the adventurous life of a private detective.

A sidelong glance at the girl beside him, however, caused him to rescind all the previous curses.

Dianne pointed ahead suddenly. "The truck's turning off the highway. Gainesburg and Maple-

ton are both straight ahead. I wonder why he's doing that?"

"That's a county road he's turning on to," Anvil said thoughtfully. "I seem to recollect it winds back through the hills for several miles and comes out on another state highway."

Anvil swung off in the wake of the truck. "It can't mean but one thing, Dianne. He's up to something."

The road was narrow, turtle-backed, littered with pot holes, and very steep and tortuous as it wound its way into the wilds. Anvil dropped back so that the truck driver would not become suspicious, and soon the truck had disappeared ahead beyond a sharp turn.

Several minutes later the road leveled off at a ridge and the tangled wilderness gave way to a small settlement. Anvil tooled on past a gas station and several buildings. Ahead there was a relatively straight stretch of road, but no sign of the truck.

"What the—Where'd he go?"

"Irving, look back!" Dianne was gazing through the rear window and Anvil pulled over to the side of the road and craned his head around. Behind the gas station there was a scattering of tumbled-down buildings, and the front end of a familiar looking truck protruded from one of them.

"Maybe he's having some kind of trouble," Anvil said.

"Or maybe he's unloading something?"

"What the devil would he be unloading those extra coffins in a gas station for?"

"Why don't we go back and sort of nose around a bit?" said Dianne. "We need gas anyhow."

"Good idea." Anvil whipped the fastback around in a U-turn and pulled in alongside an ancient gasoline pump.

A bushy-haired individual came out of the station and curled grime-encrusted fingers over the sill on Anvil's side of the car. "Fill 'er up, mister?"

Anvil nodded. "And check the oil and tires."

Dianne leaned across with a disarming smile. "Do you have a ladies' room?"

"Ain't got no indoor plumbin', ma'am, but they's a outhouse out back."

"Why don't you wait till we get back to civilization," Anvil whispered after the attendant walked to the gas pump.

"Because I only wanted an excuse to look back there where the truck is. You keep this character out here." She opened the door and slid out.

Anvil had oil, tires, battery checked, the windshild wiped and re-wiped, and had just requested that the inside of the car be swept out, when Dianne came around the corner of the building. Anvil handed the attendant a twenty dollar

bill as Dianne quickly got into the car.

"Hurry, Irving," she said, glancing apprehensively in the direction from which she had come. "Let's go!"

"But I've got eighteen dollars change coming—"

"There's no time! Hurry!" She gasped as four extremely rough and determined looking men came loping around the building. "There they are! Go, Irving, go!"

"Hey! There's the dame there in that car!" yelled one of the men. "Hey, you!"

Anvil recognized one of them at once as being the Etern-O-Rest truck driver. He twisted the key and the engine roared to life. He dropped the lever into forward, just as a large hand came through the open window and clamped on his arm.

Anvil slammed the accelerator to the floor, the rear tires spun, and the hand was torn loose, though not without inflicting considerable pain on the detective.

The car careened down the mountain.

"Wow!" Anvil breathed, "That was close! What in the name of heaven happened?"

"I was peeking in a window and they saw me." Dianne diverted the rearview mirror for the purpose of repairing her makeup. "They were unloading some of the caskets, Irving, and there was already a stack of them inside the

building. There must have been ten or twelve of them."

She dropped her lipstick back into the purse and turned toward Anvil. "I've been thinking. Maybe we're not going about this properly."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Maybe they're not stealing these caskets to bury people in. Maybe they've figured out something else to use them for. Irving, let's go on upstate and see if they make the deliveries they're supposed to make."

At the highway, Anvil turned northward. Upon reaching the town of Mapleton they sought out Gompers Brothers Funeral Home and parked across the street from it.

"Now let's go over this once more, Dianne," Anvil said. "I'm to go in and say I'm looking for something in a coffin?"

"Just say you're looking for a casket, Irving. I think it'll sound better that way. And when the Etern-O-Rest truck gets here, which it should do shortly, we'll see what happens."

Anvil got out, crossed over, and went into the undertaking parlor. There was a certain serenity to the atmosphere of the place. People tiptoed about with sad half-smiles.

A young man approached Anvil. "May I be of service, sir?"

"I'd, ah, like to see something in a coffin. Something new—"

The salesman tilted his head, as

if to imply they dealt only in new merchandise.

"What I mean," Anvil hastened, "is something in a new model."

"Someone has left us?"

"Who?"

"A dear departed. This way please."

Muted organ music filtered through the air from invisible speakers as they entered a display room. As Dianne had suggested, Anvil tried to check the name of the manufacturer of each of the caskets as they inspected the display.

When they were done, Anvil said, "Actually, I was thinking of something in a K-thirty-seven. A friend of mine recommended it. He was very satisfied with his. I mean, with the one he bought."

"K-thirty seven. That's an Etern-O-Rest number, if I'm not mistaken. We don't have one in stock at the moment. However, a shipment is due in today. How long before the dear departed will be needing it?"

Anvil found himself standing beside a window with a view of the street. Across, standing beside the car, he saw Dianne.

At the same instant, she caught sight of him and motioned frantically.

"Sir?" the salesman prompted.

"Oh, no hurry. Maybe next week or the week after," Anvil said, sidling past and out the door.

"But sir!" the young man called

after him. "You can't put these things off indefinitely!"

Anvil darted across the car. "What's up?"

"The Etern-O-Rest truck hasn't come, but there's something funny going on. A truck with Ace Caskets on the side pulled around the back, and there've been four—no, five!"

She pointed down the street and Anvil looked around to see a small florist truck enter the funeral home's rear driveway.

"There's nothing strange about florists coming to a funeral home, Dianne," he said.

"No? Well take a look at this." She handed him a newspaper. "It's the Mapleton Gazette. There's a newspaper box there on the corner and this is today's edition. How do you explain five florist delivery trucks inside of five minutes, and there's no funeral today!"

Anvil found himself gazing at the obituary column of the town's paper. In truth, it could hardly be called a column at all, for there was a single name beneath the heading.

Miss Minnie DeVilbiss, longtime Mapleton resident who went to her reward on Monday, will be buried today in Capital City.

"That's right, Irving!" Dianne exclaimed. "One dead person in Mapleton, and she's being buried more than a hundred miles away!"

"Yeah," he mused. "I see what

you're getting at. There's something fishy here."

"Let's get back to the city. We've got a lot of thinking to do."

As the miles slipped away behind them, Anvil put some real pressure on his gray matter. The only noticeable result was that, by the time they entered the city, he had an excruciating headache.

"Look, Dianne," he said as he parked outside the office, "we know they took at least one coffin to that junk yard up on the ridge. Why don't we just put it to Delmonico like we saw it? I mean, after all, we were hired to find out what was happening to the coffins. So we've found out."

"There's more to it, Irving. I think it's our duty to get to the bottom of it."

He regarded her strangely. "Duty? To who?"

"To the Anvil Investigative Agency, that's who! If you really get to the bottom of this case, it'll be sort of another feather in your cap."

She reached over and patted his cheek. "And I like a man with feathers in his cap."

The phone was ringing as they went into the office. Dianne answered it. With one hand over the mouthpiece, she spoke to Anvil. "It's Mr. Delmonico, Irving. He wants to talk to you. Are you in?"

"Yeah." He sat down in his swivel chair, swung his feet up onto the desk, and picked up the

phone. "Anvil here. Hello, Mr. Delmonico."

"Anvil," came the rumbling voice, "I want you to come right over to my office. There are a few things I'd like to discuss."

"I'll be there in a few minutes, sir."

When he had hung up, Anvil said, "Dianne, you go on home and get some rest."

"But it's only a few minutes past one, Irving, and there're lots of things to do."

"That's an order. I'll see you in the morning."

"At least call me and let me know what Delmonico wanted to see you about."

He promised he would, and drove quickly across town to the Etern-O-Rest plant. Delmonico was waiting in his office and Anvil took a chair at the side of the desk.

"Don't you have anything to report, Anvil?" said the casket tycoon.

"Report? I don't understand."

"Don't you. I thought nosing around here the way you seem to have been doing, you'd certainly have something to report. Our former night watchman had some vague recollection of a man and a woman prowling through the offices. It seems it might have been a very short man. The watchman's recollection was somewhat hampered by the fact that he was blind drunk at the time."

"Well, now—"



At that moment, the phone on Delmonico's desk buzzed. The executive snatched it up angrily. "I said no interruptions, Miss Farthington! I—what? Very well." He held the phone out toward the detective.

"It's for you."

Anvil put the receiver to his ear and immediately heard the excited voice of Dianne Swann. "Irving, I think we've cracked it!"

"Cracked what?"

"The case! I've been doing some checking and a little thinking. I believe we're on the track of a racket that spreads in all directions and amounts to hundreds of thousands of dollars, maybe even millions!"

"Huh? I—uh—"

"Irving, can you get back to the office right away? I don't think we should talk too much about it over the phone. I think he's involved. The Big D," she added cryptically.

Baffled, Anvil said, "The big—oh—Okay, I'll be right there."

He cradled the receiver and stood up. "I've got to go, Mr. Delmonico. And don't worry, you'll have a complete report."

"When!"

"When? Soon!"

Anvil snatched up his hat and beat a hasty retreat to the door and out to his car.

THE OFFICE OF the Anvil Investigative Agency was a veritable shambles. The big shiny executive desk lay on its side, files had been pulled out and their contents scattered from wall to wall, chairs and tables were overturned, and a plastic palm tree uprooted.

After surveying the scene in a state of shock for several moments, Anvil's training took over automatically, and he found himself staring at one curious thing that seemed oddly out of character with the total disaster that overshadowed everything else.

On Dianne's desk—which remained upright even though the drawers had been emptied—there was a small box of cough lozenges lying in the very center of the desk's work space. The symmetrical placing of it drew his eye, as though someone had placed it there in the hope it would be noticed.

A clue from Dianne? He walked slowly around the desk, observing the box from all angles. He sensed,

somehow, that through his insignificant thing Dianne was crying out desperately to him. *Irving . . . Irving . . .*

He pounded his temples impotently with open palms. *Think, Anvil! Think!* He righted Dianne's chair and sat down heavily, staring at the box. Cough lozenges? Anything significant about that? He knew that she carried them in her purse, and if she did put them there, choosing them from among the dozens of other items she carried in the handbag, then there had to be a clue involved.

What are they used for? For people who cough. For coughing people? For *coffin* people!

Coffin people? All right, but what does that mean? It couldn't have been Delmonico, because Anvil himself had been with the man. Of course, Delmonico could still be behind it. In a sense, he was coffin people.

Wait a minute! There was something trying to break through. A cough lozenge was also called a cough drop. That was it! It wasn't coffin people, but coffin *drop*! A place where hot coffins were unloaded! The mountain junkyard, that's where they had taken Dianne Swann! She must have recognized them or heard them say where they were going, and bright girl, she left the only clue that could lead straight to them!

Fighting mad, Irving bolted from the ravaged office and head-

ed for the elevator. As he reached the closed door he saw that the indicator was coming up. Undecided, but only for an instant, he darted into the stairwell, flattened himself against the wall, and waited.

The elevator stopped, doors whispered open, and Anvil heard a man's voice.

"It's down there, Joe. Number Four thirty-three."

Heavy footsteps clomped down the corridor and Anvil heaved a sigh. Whoever they were, they were headed for his office. He took the steps down two and three at a time, let himself quietly out a back entrance of the building in the event there were others staked out, and after a careful look around, leaped into his car.

As he rounded the corner of the building and chanced to look up toward the windows of Four thirty three, he saw a man pointing down excitedly at his car. Irving Anvil needed no further urging. He slammed the car into gear, and with tires spinning, roared off.

An hour and a half later, Anvil spun the wheel and sent the fast-back careening off the main highway onto the tortuous mountain road. As the car clawed its way up the mountain and topped the ridge into the tiny settlement, the diminutive detective touched the butt of the snub-nosed Llama Model XII snuggled in its shoulder holster. Ahead, the service station-garage-

junk yard stood deceptively innocent at the roadside.

Anvil eased his car off the opposite side of the road, idled behind a clump of trees and stopped. The moment of uncertainty he experienced as he got out and peered through the foliage was dispelled by the sight of an increasingly familiar figure—that of the Etern-O-Rest truck driver. The man sat in a chair tilted back against the filling station building, dozing with his chin on his chest.

This was enough to convince Anvil he had correctly interpreted the clue left by Dianne Swann. He scurried across the road, slipping the Llama from the holster as he went, and jammed the two-inch barrel into the driver's ribs.

Minutes later, with the trucker bound, gagged, and unconscious inside a locked storeroom, the detective quietly made his way among the maze of ramshackled buildings behind the filling station.

For the first time, he became aware of a peculiar pungent odor in the air, and it grew more noticeable the closer he got to a large corrugated metal building near the precipitous back edge of the cleared land. Anvil slithered to the side of the structure, flattened himself against the wall close beside a window with a broken pane, and listened.

Voices. Two men, and suddenly, the calm, clear voice of Dianne Swann.

"You won't get away with this, you know," she said. "The smartest thing you can do now is take me back to the city and hope the law will be lenient with you."

"What's this here lenient business, Sammy?" said Tenor Voice.

"*Haw!*" grated Baritone. "Listen to the doll, Jacko! Who you expecting, baby? U.N.C.L.E.? *Haw, haw!*"

Irving Anvil, rage boiling inside him, smashed the Llama through the remaining glass, inflicting a number of cuts on his hand and wrist, and leveled the gun on the startled hoods. "Not Illya Kuryakin, my friends. Just Irving Anvil, at your service!"

"Irving!" Dianne screamed with unrestrained delight. "My clue—you actually *understood* it!"

"Elementary, my dear Swann," he blushed. "And now, if you'll relieve these goons of their guns?"

Moments later, as Dianne held the Llama in a steady hand, Anvil finished binding, gagging and konking the pair.

"Okay," he said, "what was it you found out about this caper?"

"I'm afraid the explanation will have to wait," said a resonant voice from the doorway. "Drop the gun, Miss Swann. That is, unless you prefer being out of a job due to the untimely demise of your employer."

"Better do as he says," Anvil murmured, gazing straight into the barrel of a large revolver resting

in the massive hand of Pierre Delmonico.

The Llama clanked to the floor and both the detective and his secretary slowly raised their hands.

"A wise decision, my dear," rumbled the coffin tycoon. "And now, you will both kindly come this way."

"Now, listen, Delmonico," Anvil said, "you'd better think about this. Kidnaping isn't exactly the same as spitting on the sidewalk, you know. And if you've got anything else in mind, you'd be a whole lot better off just taking the rap for heisting a few lousy coffins—"

Delmonico's booming laugh drowned out Anvil's pitch. "Good heavens, Anvil, I do believe you're even more stupid than I gave you credit for being when I hired you! If it hadn't been for this young lady, things would be rocking along as smoothly as ever!"

"What's that wise crack about stupid supposed to mean?" Anvil snapped.

"Just this. When my board of directors accidentally got onto the missing caskets and insisted we hire an investigator, I looked very carefully before settling on you. I was convinced you would flounder about completely in the dark and my—ah—business could move right along unhindered."

"But—"

The big man waved the gun impatiently. "Time has run out for

both you Nosey Parkers. Now, let's go."

At that instant, the still mountain air was split by the mournful wail of something that sounded to Anvil like an air raid siren. Delmonico's mouth dropped open and he spun about to peer out the door.

Dianne Swann took advantage of the moment by executing a judo maneuver that sent Anvil flying safely through the smashed window, and in the follow-through, sailed after him.

Delmonico reacted, but a split instant too late, a pair of slugs from his revolver twanging off the metal window frame and whining away over the treetops.

"What on earth is that racket!" said Anvil as they both darted toward the relative security of a cluster of junked automobiles.

"Probably their warning system," replied Dianne.

"Warning system?" He had no choice now but to blurt out, "I don't understand any of this! What's going on?"

The answer was delayed from another unexpected quarter. From a large building nearby there came the roar of an engine. Huge double doors smashed outward, and a large truck—on the side of which Anvil read, *Ace Casket Co.*—came lurching out, gaining speed as it made for the road.

"It's a raid!" bellowed Delmonico, who had given up any attempt to re-corner his quarry and was

dashing, along with a half dozen other men, toward an area of parked cars.

There was the staccato crackle of gunfire from the direction of the road, and Anvil and Dianne caught glimpses of figures dashing back and forth, crouching and firing.

The truck reached the roadway, turned hard to the left, and as it did a slug caught the right front tire. Rubber screeched against pavement; the truck tottered briefly, then toppled over. The van broke open and a tangled mass of caskets, some two dozen or more, came spilling out onto the road.

As each struck the pavement, it burst open, sending a cascade of clear liquid sloshing down the roadway. Very quickly, a small flood developed, carrying along with it the smashed caskets and several hapless individuals who happened to be in the path chosen by gravity to drain off the liquid as it gushed through the bushes and down the slopes.

"Okay, you two!" someone called. "Come out from there, and no funny business!"

Two clean-cut young men stood off to the right of Irving's and Dianne's refuge, pistols leveled into the rusting mass of abandoned automobiles.

"Great Scott!" muttered Anvil. "While we were standing here staring they got the drop on us again!"

Dianne Swann stepped out into the open. "I don't think we have to worry now, Irving. Unless I'm badly mistaken, these men are not in the employ of Pierre Delmonico. However, until everything is cleared up we'd better do as they say."

"Hey—" said one of the men. "Are you by any chance Miss Swann?"

"I am," Dianne smiled, tentatively lowering her hands. "And this is Mr. Irving Anvil."

"The private eye?"

"The same," beamed Dianne proudly.

"Well," said the second man as both slipped their guns back into their holsters, "we can thank you for cracking a very tough case for us, Mr. Anvil. I'm Agent Halrohan of the Alcohol Tax Bureau."

"Alcohol? What's that got to do with—"

"We'll check with you folks back in the city, okay? We've still got quite a bit to do around here. C'mon, Ed."

The two agents trotted away, Anvil staring in total perplexity after them. "Dianne?"

"We'll talk about it on the way home, Irving." She went back into the building and picked up the Llama Model XII, dusted it off, and handed it back to Anvil.

The detective sniffed the air. "That smell—there's something familiar about it. What—" He snapped his fingers. "Moonshine

whiskey! Dianne, do you realize what this is? It's a big moonshine still!"

LIGHTS OF THE city glowed outside the windows of the Alcohol Tax Bureau. Dianne and Anvil sat beside Agent Halrohan's desk, while across the room, handcuffed and glowering, sat the deposed casket magnet, Pierre Delmonico.

"It seems that using the caskets to take moonshine whisky to market was only the beginning of Delmonico's plans," the agent said. "He had plans for using them to transport stolen property, narcotics, illegal cigarettes, and anything else that needed concealment. Fiendishly clever. Who would ever think of stopping a casket truck?"

Dianne Swann consulted a small notebook. "The moonshine operation alone would have made a fantastic profit. Each K-thirty-seven casket would hold twenty-seven cubic feet of liquid, which would be something over two hundred gallons. Wholesalers here in Capital City would pay approximately eight dollars per gallon, or fourteen hundred dollars for a casket full. This would have been a profit of nearly seven dollars a gallon to Mr. Delmonico and his associates, as they also owned the still. Therefore a truck load of twenty-four caskets being brought into the city would be a gross profit of nearly thirty grand."

"A mere thirty trips and the

profit would be a cool million," said one of the agents.

"What were all those flower trucks doing in Mapleton?" Anvil said.

Halrohan said, "We checked that out. They were deliveries being brought in from outlying stills."

Dianne gazed toward Delmonico. "If he hadn't been greedy, he just might have succeeded. By stealing the caskets instead of paying for them."

Delmonico's sonorous voice, tinged with bitterness, filled the office. "And if it hadn't been for you, Miss, that idiot Anvil would still be wondering what to do next!"

"Wrong, sir!" she said. "Who else but Irving could have figured out the clue I left and been clever enough to lead the revenue agents to the still?"

"Those were agents coming to the office as I left?" mused the detective.

"That's right," said Halrohan. "Miss Swann called us and said come to your office at once. She had called earlier with quite a few questions about the moonshine business. Very detailed questions, I might add. Frankly, we wondered if she wasn't someone thinking of going into the business."

Anvil stood up, and taking his secretary's arm, walked toward the door. He turned, briefly. "If she ever did, gentlemen, you would be in big trouble!"

Arm in arm, they walked out.

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CODE NAME: PANTHER

by BEA BROWN

Nothing much stood between three Red agents and their strange mission of terror. Nothing but a little girl, a Siamese cat—and a boy who didn't like spies—even dead ones . . .

THE DAY did not start off well at all. To begin with I overslept and as a result I arrived late at my baby-sitting job.

Things didn't go too well there, either. The baby wouldn't sleep, the dog got out, and the oldest boy got hit with a baseball. Besides all that my leather loafers got a milk bath and the youngest daughter spilt grape juice on my brand new blouse and wranglers.

When I got home at six o'clock I was looking forward to a good, home-cooked meal. However, I found a note saying my parents had decided to spend the weekend on the beach and Keith, my nineteen year-old-brother, was not coming home from college for the weekend after all.

Then came the final blow. Rock called and called off our date. His

dad was kind of peeved with him for not spending much time at home and Rock figured he'd better stay there and make peace with him.

Maybe I'd better explain about Rock. Rock—Montgomery Blair Rockland III—is heir to millions and is an only child to boot. They live on a beautiful estate not too far from my house, complete with pool, stables, kennel, and tennis courts. Because of Keith I got to know him, and about six months ago he became aware of the fact that I'm not just Keith's younger sister, but also a girl a year younger than him. We've been dating ever since and a few days ago, at Rock's command, I moved Hellfire, my mare, to his dad's stable.

Now Rock and his dad are very close, but his dad has his funny

Baby-sitter by avocation, ardent U.N.C.L.E. fan, Bea Brown has one other distinction which sets her apart from the rank and file of successful writers. She's exactly fifteen years old! When CODE NAME: PANTHER reached our editorial desk, together with a note which revealed Miss Brown's age, we were astonished, to put it mildly, at the skill and the pacing of this excellent little yarn. To Miss Brown we can say, "You have the natural magic which only the fine writers have. May it mature, with you, into the promise of great things to come!"



points and one is that Rock spends a lot of time in his den. Mr. Rockland had their basement re-done for Rock. It has three fireplaces, a pool table, ping pong table, desk, bar (stocked with soda pop and potato chips), library, desk, trophy cases (for Rock's awards from school and athletic events), card table, couches, chairs, stereo hi-fi, gun racks, and chairs—in short a teens heaven.

His dad's beef was that Rock should spend a lot of time there by himself, and so, whenever his dad was getting peeved about something Rock would spend an evening there to smooth the old man down.

His dad likes me, says I've got guts. Once he told Rock, in my presence, that I would make a darn good wife for him, but, to get on with my story—

Not too long after Rock had called, my friend Evelyn phoned. Her grandmother was arriving from Greece that night and she wanted her to meet a typical American teenager. My first impulse was to say no, but I didn't. I dressed in a new blue corduroy suit with a short skirt, a black patent leather bag with boots, and wide belt to match. I wore a white blouse and was very careful with my make-up.

They picked me up at 8:30. The plane was arriving at ten; so we had plenty of time, and I felt restless at the airport. I was wandering around, when suddenly a

young man approached me and drew me aside.

To my surprise he seemed to look at my attire, then drew out a card identifying him as a C.I.A. agent. I gulped.

He said, "Will you help me?"

Stupidly, and with no idea what trouble I was going to get in, I agreed. He gave me four small sections of sponge rubber, that when put together formed a ball about the size of an orange along with a silver pen, and asked me to put them in my purse. I did so.

He then told me the pen would cut anything and he had given it to me as a safety device. I was beginning to get nervous. He then asked me to go up to the girl with the orange teddy bear. He said she'd just flown in, and was coming through the exit across from us. I was to say, "Walk with it."

She'd take the sections while we pretended to hug each other. If something should go wrong, I was to dial seven sevens and explain what had happened. I asked if I shouldn't have some sort of identification to give—after all, I mean, it was the C.I.A.

He muttered a bit, then said, "Sleek. Trim. Assured. Powerful. Code name Panther. Perfect. Now remember it. I'll inform them of it. Code name Panther. There she is. Go to it, girl. And thank you, whoever you are."

And then he was gone.

I shrugged my shoulders and

proceeded to get it over with. She was a tall, good-looking girl. I threw my arms around her, whispering the message in her ear. To my bewilderment she drew me away from the crowd. Looking over her shoulder, she gasped when she saw three men walking towards her.

She frowned. That girl was really scared. Then she pushed the bear at me and said, "Now get the hell out of here. As fast as you can go."

She gave me a push, just in case I didn't get going.

I ran. I couldn't find Evelyn and her family anywhere. I saw the three men grab the girl and a man come to her rescue.

I ran blindly from the building—just in time to notice Evelyn's car leaving the airport without me!

I ran across the lawn and caught up to them. On account of the heavy traffic, they were moving very slowly. I yanked open the car door and hanging on to teddy with one hand, I swung myself into the car, pulling the door shut behind me.

As luck would have it, I'd landed next to the old lady. From the look on her face I knew just what she was thinking—"These crazy Americans! Such flamboyant things they do! Swinging into cars! Carrying orange bears around with them!"

I gave her my most bewitching smile. It didn't work. To this day

that old lady is firmly convinced that I am mentally a nitwit. After what happened that night I'm not so sure she isn't right.

Amid many apologies, they dropped me off at my house. Inside, I checked all the locks carefully, then set about hiding the bear and sections.

The bear didn't take too long. The sections did. After all, there were four of them. But finally they were all hidden.

I changed my clothes to something more comfortable. As it was a rather cool night I put on black denim stretch wranglers and a black, long-sleeved shirt, with a button down collar. I changed watches, strapping on a black leather watch with luminous hands and numbers.

I had just pulled on boots when my bedroom door opened.

I gulped. In walked the three men I'd seen at the airport. They leered at me and my stomach sort of flipped. My instincts told me these men played for keeps.

"What do you jokers think you're doing? My parents aren't here at the moment and I've got no money and there's nothing of value here," I lied, putting indignation, fright, and cockiness into my voice.

They didn't fall for it. They searched my room, then left. They said if I stuck my head out the door they'd shoot it off.

As soon as that door closed behind them I whirled around, hunt-

ing an escape route. Without thinking, I dived quickly out the window.

Don't believe those stories about jumping out the window without getting a scratch. It isn't so. I know from experience. I'd dived with my hands formed in fists, breaking the way. When I got to my feet and started to run, I suddenly felt something cold sticking me in the back. I know when I'm defeated. With as much dignity as possible, I retreated back in the house.

I was marched back to my room. There they seated and tied me. This time they tried to use a little force to get their information. With each slap I became more determined not to tell them anything.

"You're wasting your time. I don't even know what you want to know," I told them.

At length the leader announced it was useless and they again searched my room, again finding nothing.

They gagged me and said they were going to search the house again. They also promised me that if they didn't find what they were looking for they were going to take me for a ride, some place where it wouldn't matter how long I screamed. On that cheerful note they left.

Shortly afterwards a little head poked in the window. It was Syn, my beautiful Siamese totally unpredictable cat. I moved my hands as much as I could and Syn came

over and began chewing the string that held them, whether out of playfulness or intelligence, I don't know. I prefer to think it was the latter.

Anyway, she chewed them through and in a few minutes I was free.

Thinking this time, I got my gun and shoulder holster out and put them on. Rock and I go target shooting a good bit. I loaded my gun and put it in the holster. There was something very reassuring about the cold deadliness of the gun. I have a Beretta .25, of James Bond fame, which is really a very good gun. I hunted for the knife Keith had given me one year and had taught me how to use. I put it down the side of my right boot. Then I grabbed the silver pen that C.I.A. man had given me and took my black windbreaker. Hurriedly I beat it, Syn riding on my shoulder.

I went straight to Rocky's. Of all nights, the whole estate was completely deserted except for Rock. He was in the den. I fell into his arms, babbling like an idiot. I know how I must have sounded and looked. Dressed in black and hair flying, wearing a gun, talking about the C.I.A., Communists, and orange teddy bears. He must have thought I finally flipped my lid.

He dragged me into the light and said, "My God! What happened to you?"

Anger and concern showed in

his voice. Suddenly, I pulled myself together and told him the whole story. I guess he believed me. Why shouldn't he? My knuckles were all cut up and my face was bruised and swollen. My upper lip was cut and there was blood at the corner of my mouth.

Swearing, Rocky went to the phone. He dialed and then put the phone quietly back down. He turned to me and said in a flat voice, "They're here. They've cut the phone wires."

We just stood there and looked at each other. It was all utterly mad, utterly impossible. But it was happening, and to us.

Rocky went into action first, barricading the door. I began looking for another exit. He read my mind. "There's no other way out, except the window."

As one we turned and looked at it. Rock loaded his gun and put on his holster. We went to the window. As Rock sized it up I remembered the pen. Quickly I ran it around the window. Five seconds later Rock gently lifted the glass out of the window. He went thru it first. Syn and I followed.

We crouched among the bushes and began to creep toward the garage, guns drawn. The man on guard turned and saw us. We both fired. Who first, we still don't know. The man jerked twice, then fell without a sound. It was easy to see why. One of the bullets had hit him squarely in the throat. The oth-



er lay somewhere inside his head, between his eyes.

For those of you who have never seen a dead body—don't. Rocky and I stood there, looking at this man whose life we had taken, this total stranger. So this was the world of espionage. Guns and sudden death. Fear and horror. A game played for keeps without rules. I didn't want any part of it.

I wanted to wave my hand and have the man get up and say it was just a joke, that he wasn't dead after all. But he was. Rocky led me away to the garage.

I'll say one thing for the Communists, they aren't stupid. Someone had put a bullet hole in every tire there. I got mad all over again. They could have just left the air out. Instead they'd destroyed every tire in the place. Suddenly I wasn't quite so sorry for the dead man any more. He'd played his hand and lost. Lost to two scared kids who'd stumbled into a grown-up game by accident.

We left the garage and headed for the stable. We grabbed bridles, not stopping long enough for sad-

dles, and went to our horses. The great Demon, a hunter imported from Ireland, winner of more ribbons than any hunter in America, was Rock's. I bridled the beautiful, half Arab, half thoroughbred Hell-fire. She is a blood bay with a white blaze and four black stockings, black mane and tail. She's one of the greatest jumpers in America—in fact, only Demon is real competition for her.

We mounted and left the stable by the back door, Rocky grabbing two ropes as we left. We rode like bats out of hell across the deserted pasture, stopping when we reached the woods.

To our utter amazement they were on horses following us. That was a laugh. We couldn't lose now. They obviously knew little about horses. We let them see us before melting into the woods. Like pigs to the slaughter they followed. We waited until they entered well into the woods before circling around behind them.

Guns pointed at their backs, we kept silent until they were only a few yards ahead of us.

"Put your hands up," was the old cliché Rocky used. They did. I quickly cut the ropes in half. Then Rock tied them up, hands tied behind their backs and legs tied together underneath the horses' stomachs. He took their weapons and we headed back.

Rock remembered then that the garage phone was on a different

line from the others. Holding my breath, I dialed seven sevens. Somebody said, "Channel B. Top priority. Go ahead, please."

Surprising myself with my calmness, I answered, as if I had been doing it all my life, "This is Panther. Repeat, Panther. Have captured two Communist agents and still am in possession of teddy bear and sponge rubber sections. Please send help."

I answered a few questions and was informed that help was on the way.

Not ten minutes later half a dozen people from the C.I.A. arrived. Rocky and I told our story and answered more questions. Finally, all but two men left, taking the non-talking prisoners with them.

The horses were groomed and stabled before we went to my house. I opened everyone a soft drink and gave Syn, who had clung to my shoulder the whole time, her favorite treat—a bowl of chocolate milk. Then we went to my room.

"Can't you see the articles? They're in plain sight," I told the two C.I.A. men, smiling. After a long search they gave up.

I walked to my stack of stuffed animals and picked up one of four big panda bears. The men stared at me. I held the bear out to them and said, "Here's your bear."

The young blonde spoke first, "Our bear is orange."

"Was orange," I replied. "Black

and white shoe polish did the trick." I was so pleased with my success.

"Well, I'll be damned," swore the dark-haired one softly. "And where's the other?" he asked.

Again I walked to the pile. From way in the back, I removed a red ball from Flipper's mouth. "I hope you don't mind. I glued the sections together and sprayed the whole thing red."

Both of the men smiled. They looked kind of funny, what with the bear and "ball" in their big tanned hands.

The blond looked at me and said, "I want to thank you on behalf of the C.I.A. You got mixed up in this at the airport because you happened to be dressed like a young woman agent in our section, who should have been there—but she was late. Our man assumed you were she. Since he's been working out of Mexico City he didn't know her, you see, and

thought you were there to help him."

Now it made more sense to me. Rock looked faintly amused.

The C.I.A. man went on with charm, "See what happens when you wear smart mod attire? But I want to tell both of you that you've done your country a great service tonight. Unfortunately, I can't reveal too much. Code name Panther. It suits you. But from now on, it is Tiger."

He looked at Rock. "Take good care of her, son. She's a mighty fine girl."

And with that they were gone. But I had the feeling then that I hadn't seen the last of them. Not by a long shot.

Then Rocky pulled me close to him, gently brushing my hair out of my eyes. "My girl is a mighty fine girl," he said. Then he kissed me. Maybe it didn't cure sore lips and a bruised soul. But it sure as heck helped!



A THRILL-PACKED SPY STORY



THE MIND THIEVES



The fat man waved his hand. "It won't hurt much. You'll just go to sleep. And when you wake up, you'll do what I want. What I want, incidentally, is your chief's murder—now!"

by JOHN LOWER

AS HE STEPPED from a checkered cab, Christopher Tanner noticed a group of demonstrators silently pacing the sidewalk in front of the bar he had been looking for. They walked to the end of the block, then turned and started back again.

There were eight to ten of them, all ages, including two girls. Three carried posters protesting administration policy in Vietnam. Several

of the demonstrators had dark skins, like Latin Americans.

Tanner thought the location a peculiar place to demonstrate; but protest marches had been turning up throughout Washington's downtown business section in recent months.

Christopher Tanner went inside the bar, out of the bright August sun. The clock above the rack of bottles showed ten twenty-five. He

sat at the bar and laid his folded trench coat on the stool beside him, as he had been instructed. Looking around, Tanner saw the place was empty except for a couple in a booth along the wall opposite the bar. He ordered a Rob Roy from the hefty, red-faced bartender and lit a cigarette.

The girl came through the door at twenty-five minutes to eleven, exactly as Tanner had been told she would. She stood looking for a moment, then walked over to the bar and sat with the stool holding Tanner's trench coat between them. Leaning down, she casually placed her black leather pocketbook on the foot ledge in front of the vacant stool.

She appeared to be in her late twenties and moved with the almost feline grace and efficiency characteristic of so many of the Washington career girls.

Her dark hair was cut in a Barbra Streisand bangs-over-forehead style, under a cranberry-colored pillbox hat. An adequate figure was outlined by her cotton sheath. The striking thing about the girl was her uncompromising mouth, a mouth used to saying, "No."

The bartender came over from the end of the bar, where he had been reading a newspaper. The girl ordered a bourbon and soda and sat staring at the bar until the bartender placed the drink in front of her.

After sipping the drink, she turned to Tanner and said, "Hot today."

"Eighty-eight, I believe," he answered. "Makes you thankful for air-conditioning."

"I don't have it myself. Wish I did."

The code was completed.

She finished her drink, put some change on the bar and slid off the stool. Smiling briefly, she took her purse from the foot ledge and went outside. Tanner finished his own drink, laid a bill on the bar and casually brushed his coat from the stool with his arm. As he picked it up he slipped the envelope she had left under his coat.

Out on the sidewalk, Tanner was about to signal a cruising cab, when movement at the corner of the block caught his eye. Frowning against the sun, he paused to watch. The demonstrators were tossing their posters into the rear of a station wagon. People paused momentarily to watch, then continued along the sidewalk.

As the last several demonstrators were piling into the station wagon, Tanner noticed a patch of red on the head of one of the women. She disappeared into the rear of the wagon. Christopher Tanner began walking quickly toward the corner, but the car jumped away from the curb and was lost in the flow of traffic.

He was sure he had seen a cranberry pillbox hat.

Twenty minutes later, Christopher Tanner was sitting in an office of what appeared to be, from the sign on the front window, a small real estate firm located in the northwest section of Washington. Sitting across the desk from Tanner was a balding man with a cigar clamped in one corner of his mouth. He seemed the stereotype of the hefty, middle-aged real estate agent. The man was known to Tanner only by the name Arnold. He was chief of the Washington division of LINC-Liasion for Intelligence Notification and Control.

Set up by President Kennedy after the Bay of Pigs debacle in 1961, LINC was authorized by Congress to, ". . . coordinate findings of military and civilian agencies and report thereon to the Executive."

In actual practice, LINC was a convenience for avoiding bureaucratic red tape and handling crises requiring immediate action. LINC was Christopher Tanner's employer.

It was his way of life. It might well some day be his way of death.

The real estate bit was a functional cover—a legitimate reality firm which advertised in the *Washington Post* and actually transacted several sales and rentals a month. Two of the division's five operatives were licensed real estate agents.

". . . but by the time I reached the corner the station wagon was lost in traffic," Christopher Tanner

concluded his account of the meeting in the bar. "And I saw three women get into the station wagon. There had been only two marching."

Arnold muttered an oath and relighted the stump of his cigar.

"Who was she?" Tanner asked.

Arnold opened the folder lying on the desk in front of him and began reading. "Name; Patricia Harris, nicknamed Patti. Age; twenty-seven. Chief stenographer for our Baltimore division, employed for five years. Marital status; single."

Beside the folder lay the envelope the girl had passed to Tanner in the bar. Arnold picked it up. "This is her latest report. She had been employed as secretary for Marrack Targa."

Tanner's face frowned with concentration. "Targa. The owner of the Horse farm outside Alexandria?"

"That's his cover."

"Cover?"

Arnold took a key from his pocket and unlocked a drawer of his desk. He took out a manila folder and handed it to Tanner. "Read this thoroughly before you leave this office. It's all the information the girl had gathered on Targa. He first came to the attention of the CIA in nineteen forty-nine, at which time he was serving in the Hungarian AVO, stationed in Budapest."

He rose to become an officer by fifty-four and distinguished himself

by his brutality in the October Revolution in fifty-six. In fifty-eight, he fell into disfavor with his superiors and defected. Our records next pick him up as top thug of the South American dictator Fuerga, in nineteen sixty-one."

"The Fuerga regime was overthrown several years ago."

"Right. And our dossier of Targa's activities ends with that revolution. Five months ago his name turned up during a routine security check of dignitaries planning a visit to a defense installation. He still has his contacts in State and Defense.

"At any rate, we approved his visit and at the same time put a standard twenty-four-hour observation on his farm in Virginia. Excavation and construction were noted. Last March he advertised for an experienced confidential secretary. Patricia Harris, armed with a battery of references from our Baltimore cover agency, answered the ad and was hired. For three months she's been supplying us with progress reports on the excavation and construction at Targa's farm.

"After the excavation was completed, several pieces of data processing equipment arrived at the farm one afternoon. The next morning the excavation was filled and the equipment was nowhere in sight."

Tanner shrugged. "I still don't see LINC's interest."

"We put a trace on the equipment. It was purchased in France, paid for by a cover agency of the KGB."

Tanner thought for a moment. "Why should the Soviets finance the operation of an independent?"

"Probably because he's made a deal with them to provide something they want, cheaper and easier than they can obtain it themselves."

"Any ideas?"

"None at the moment." He stared glumly at the badly gnawed cigar which had gone dead. "That girl is acquainted with information the Commies would love to get their hands on—information costly to us in money and time if it leaks. As you're aware, they're not noted for weak stomachs when attempting to extract information. I don't know what her pain tolerance limit would be, but she is a woman. You're problem is to get her out of there before Targa or anyone else has a chance to work on her.

"Those people of his in the station wagon may have eliminated her already, but I doubt it. A man as thorough as Targa would personally assure himself that she was of no further use. If you can't get her out, make sure she's of no possible use to the opposition."

Christopher Tanner took the folder he was handed, lit a cigarette and began to read. The reports from the Harris girl described Targa's habits, guests to his farm, the

physical layout of his property. A chronology had been compiled of her reports concerning the excavation, up to the arrival and disappearance of the computer equipment. Some photographs of Targa and a history of his background were included in the file. He was a short, mole-like man, almost completely bald. The photographs were dated 1962 and 1964.

Tanner handed the file to Arnold. "What's my cover?"

"Horse owner from Maryland. You want to breed a mare with one of Targa's stallions. See Larry before you leave. He'll give you a briefing. Know anything about horses, Tanner?"

"The front end from the rear."

Arnold didn't smile. Tanner knew he wouldn't. "An hour with Larry and you'll know enough to pass as a gentleman horse dealer, if you're not questioned too closely. Anything you can learn of Targa's operation will of course be appreciated. But the girl before all else."

"With me, the lady always comes first," Tanner said, smiling.

Arnold did not smile but opened a folder on his desk and began reading. Tanner shrugged and closed the door softly behind him.

CHRISTOPHER TANNER left Washington by way of the Fourteenth Street Bridge and followed Route 1 south. He drove mechanically, his mind rehashing the briefing he had been given on eques-

trian breeding. After the briefing he had been given the keys to a Jaguar XKE, a machine befitting a flashy, wealthy dealer in fine horseflesh. Tanner found the engine rumble relaxing as he drove.

Marrack Targa's farm lay several miles southwest of Alexandria. It was a washed white, ante-bellum mansion, complete with pillared portico and red slate roof. Trees



shaded the house from the bake-oven sun. Stables flanked the house on either side.

As Tanner geared down the XKE and turned onto the gravel driveway approaching the house, he glimpsed two fenced, oval tracks behind the stables. He drove slowly, visualizing in his mind the blueprints of the house which had been purloined or reproduced by Patti Harris, and trying to place the rooms.

He parked the jaguar in the ragged shade of a willow tree, next to a tan pick-up truck. As he walked across the driveway and up the steps to the portico, he wished his cover had been sufficient to include a pistol; but a neighborly horse dealer, coming to discuss business

over a mint julep, would hardly arrive armed.

If the situation became desperate, there was always the .357 Magnum in the concealed compartment of the Jaguar's door panel. Provided he had time and opportunity to get to it.

Tanner banged the brass door knocker twice against its base. His collar and back were moist and he could feel perspiration beads on his forehead, not completely due to the heat.

The door opened inward and its frame was filled by what appeared to be an unemployed giant; well over forty, also well over six feet and two hundred pounds.

"Mr. Christopher Tanner, of Tanner Heath, Maryland, to see Mr. Targa, please," Tanner said brightly, giving the man a patrician smile.

The big man hesitated.

"I've come to do business with Mr. Targa," Tanner added, still smiling. "Horse business."

"Come inside. I'll see if Mr. Targa can see you." The man's voice was like chalk scratching the wrong way on a chalkboard.

Tanner stepped past him into a large receiving hall with a number of doors. The rectangular hall was carpeted and a large chandelier with a multitude of shimmering prisms was suspended from the wall.

The valet opened one of the doors and nodded for Tanner to

enter. He did so and the door closed behind him.

He was standing in a luxurious library, also carpeted and with chandelier. The wall opposite the door was largely taken up by a set of French windows. The other two opposite walls were shelved floor to ceiling and filled with richly bound books.

Tanner walked over to the French windows.

The view overlooked the right half of the rear lawn, which sloped up to a timberline. Midway up the slope, to the left of the stable and track, was a large plot of freshly-sown sod; the excavation described by Patti Harris.

When studying the blueprints, Tanner had noted that a narrow wing off the kitchen—newly added by Marrack Targa after he had purchased the property—was the only section not labeled by the draftsman. Patti Harris had joted a note on the blueprint; the windows in this wing were small, high on the walls and shatter-proof. This wing and the excavation site were the two areas which Targa had instructed Patti to avoid.

Tanner was peering through the window, trying to get a glimpse of this wing when the door opened suddenly.

"Mr. Tanner, I am Marrack Targa."

Tanner's host had a booming voice. Tanner strode from the window and the two men shook hands.

This was the same man whose photograph Tanner had seen in Arnold's office. Targa had a stubby body and gray skin which seemed to suffer from lack of sunlight. His arms and legs, like his body, were stubby but well-developed. He looked like some powerful rodent. Targa wore a knit sport shirt, ascot, madras sport coat, slacks and tennis sneakers. There were several puckered scars on his shaved head and his nose was like a hammer.

"I'm told you've come to talk horses, Mr. Tanner. Cigarette?"

Tanner refused the gold case which Targa offered him and took a cigarette from his own pack.

"I'm a creature of habit," he said with a bland smile.

"A drink, then?" Targa walked to one section of the book shelves and pressed the binding of an ordinary-looking volume. That section of books swung out from the shelf, revealing a set of glasses and a half a dozen bottles. A small metal box was refrigerated to preserve ice cubes.

"Scotch, please," Tanner said. "On the rocks."

Targa poured three fingers of Red Label over two ice cubes for each of them, handed one glass to Tanner and nodded at a black, leather chair. "I understand you're interested in horse-breeding, Mr. Tanner."

"That's right," Tanner said. He took a hefty drink of the scotch

and sat down. "I'm carrying on the family tradition, you might say."

Marrack Targa nodded. He finished his scotch and water in three swigs and set the glass on an end table.

"I have a beautiful chestnut mare—" Tanner began. He suddenly felt intensely hot and his tongue kept tripping over his words. "—lutiful mestnut chare."

Tanner's head began to swivel on his neck; he looked up. The chandelier seemed to be thrusting down at him, then reversed itself and shot back toward the ceiling.

"Not feeling well, Mr. Tanner?" Marrack Targa asked. "Something wrong with your linkage, perhaps." He laughed.

Tanner's mouth worked futilely. The glass dropped from his frozen hand to the carpet. Suddenly Tanner found himself on the floor beside the glass. And Marrack Targa, towering over him like a giant, was laughing as if all reason had taken leave of him.

His head felt clogged and his eyelids seemed to be glued to his cheeks. When he managed to work his eyes open, Tanner found he was lying on a cot in a narrow, cell-like room. There was a single window, high on the wall opposite the bed. The cot was fastened to the padded wall with large clamps. He was still wearing all his clothing but, running his hands across his body, found his pockets had been emptied.

The glass! It must have been the glass. Targa drank from the same bottle, so it couldn't have been the bottle. Tanner smiled ruefully at the thought of a mickied drinking glass.

"How do you feel?"

He started to jerk upright and felt the flame of pain streak from his neck up across the back of his head. He winced and turned his entire body slowly to see the girl. She was sitting on a stool by the head of the cot. Over his shoulder, Tanner could see the thick, windowless metal door.

"I won't be trying any high hurdles for the next few minutes, Miss Harris."

Her eyes were red-flecked and tired, and her tangled hair needed combing. The gray cotton sheath she had been wearing when Tanner met her in the Washington bar was rumpled.

But he still experienced the same momentary electric sensation as he had in the bar.

"There ought to be a Federal law against a girl as pretty as you being mixed up in intelligence, Patti." He smiled with effort and sat upright on the cot. His head felt as if it would drop on the floor and splatter.

"Are you all right, Mr. Tanner?"

"Christopher." He rubbed his head. "If you've learned anything about this operation that wasn't in your reports—like how the hell to

get out of here—tell me. We probably don't have much time."

She shook her head. "Nothing very spectacular. "After I left the Diplomat, a bunch of Targa's people hustled me into a station wagon and brought me back here. I was brought directly to this cell. About an hour ago, Targa came in, hit me several times, and called me a number of things I'd rather not repeat until I know you a little better."

"Fine."

"What?"

"Getting to know each other a little better."

"About twenty minutes ago the door opened and somebody shoved you inside. That's it."

Tanner stood up, let his head clear for a moment and walked to the wall with the window. By standing on his toes he was able to see over the bottom ledge of the frame; the window was too small for even a child to wriggle through. He turned to the girl.

"How did Targa break your cover, Patti?"

"I don't know."

"Ever call from inside the house?"

"No."

"How did you transmit to Arnold?"

"A routine friendly letter code. I can't understand how I was found out."

"Perhaps I can explain that little mystery for you, Mr. Tanner." Marrack Targa's voice seemed to



ooze from the ceiling. "There is a roadside pay phone about a mile from here which my employes use from time to time. When I became—curious about Miss Harris' somewhat excess curiosity, I installed a tape recorder in the telephone receiver."

"I called Arnold, twice," Patti said in an agonized whisper. Tanner pointed to a fluorescent light fixture in the center of the ceiling.

"Yes, you did, Miss Harris," said Targa's voice from the light fixture, "and I have both those conversations preserved on tape. Mr. Tanner, you and Miss Harris will dine with me in half an hour. I will then explain your respective roles in my operation."

There was a click, indicating the speaker had been switched off. Tanner stepped directly beneath the light, dropped into a crouch and leaped. There was a metallic clank and Tanner landed with the fluorescent tubes in his hand. He reached up, wrapped several dangling wires around his hand and yanked; a small microphone was attached to two of the wires.

"That should give them something to do while we're eating," he said, tossing the wires and microphone on the floor.

MARRACK TARGA was an ostentatious gourmet.

The long table centered in the mansion's dining room was set with pewter service for twelve. Bowls of steaming clam chowder and chilled goblets of white wine were at the head of the table and the two settings flanking it.

The room itself was like Hollywood's conception of the splendor of the ante-bellum South. Three immense, ornate, cut-glass chandeliers lighted it. The crew-cut guard who had silently escorted Tanner and Patti from their cell, now held one chair for Patti. She had been allowed to brush her hair and freshen her lipstick, but fatigue and worry still circled her eyes. Tanner sat at the place across the table from her. The guard walked unhurriedly from the room, closing the door behind him.

Tanner took a cigarette from the

box on the table and fired it with a pewter lighter. He looked around the room. Three slender windows spaced proportionately on both of the long walls; a circular window juddered high on the end wall. One concession had been made to the changing times; the dining room, like the library, was air-conditioned.

Marrack Targa, wearing black formal attire, entered the room and noiselessly crossed the burgundy carpeting. He sat between Patti and Tanner at the head of the table.

"Good evening," he said, smiling brightly. "I hope I have not kept you waiting."

Tanner crushed his cigarette in an ashtray and exhaled smoke in front of Targa's face. "What follows dinner? A serenade of spirituals?"

"A personal tour of my facilities. Please eat your soup before it cools."

Tanner found the chowder abundant with clams, the wine, tart and cool.

"Mind if we talk shop while we eat, Targa?" Tanner asked.

"Of course not."

"How did you know I wasn't a horse breeder?"

"After I first learned of Miss Harris' connection with American intelligence, a month ago, I had my friends from KGB supply me with photographs and dossiers of operatives most likely to be assigned to

a case of this nature. After the abduction this morning, I knew it was only a matter of time until someone was sent to rescue Miss Harris.

"The moment you entered the library, your photograph was taken by a camera within the chandelier. Every room of my house has a chandelier, Mr. Tanner," Targa said, smiling proudly, "and every chandelier has a camera. A check of your photograph against my files and—" He shrugged, indicating the inevitable.

"Why did you have your people bring Miss Harris back here, if you were so sure LINC would send someone after her."

"Because it is not her I want. —It's you."

"Me?"

"More correctly, a native American male, educated in this country with some knowledge of its governmental and political structure. According to my dossier, Mr. Tanner, you fit those specifications rather well. Bachelor's degree in political science from George Washington University, service in the Marine Corps, the CIA and now, LINC.

A Negro servant, dressed in 18th Century attire, removed their soup bowls and replaced them with large pewter plates containing whole African lobsters, french-fried potatoes and creamed corn.

Conversation ceased as they ate, each in his own way. Targa,

melted butter dripping from his chin, with a noisy appreciation of the food. Tanner mechanically, his mind speculating. Patti Harris picked listlessly at her food.

"It's time you were told your function, Mr. Tanner."

They had finished dinner. Targa was smoking a thick, rank-smelling cigar. Tanner lighted a cigarette and finished his coffee.

"As Miss Harris has no doubt informed you people, I have installed a computer operation."

"You didn't make any effort to keep it a secret," Patti Harris said, the first words she had spoken during the meal. "The excavation could be seen from the highway."

Targa began a chuckle which erupted into a loud, bloated laugh. "That was part of my plan, which proved too clever for the mentality of the American secret service. The excavation was a ruse, meant to draw American agents who would attempt to demolish it. How embarrassing when they were caught and the world learned they had blown up a hole containing the carcass of a horse."

"But the computer programming equipment," Patti began.

"You'll see it soon enough." Targa turned to face Tanner. "You, sir, will be its first project. A dry run, you could call it. During the next two days you will undergo machine treatments directing your every action to one purpose—the liquidation of Arnold,

head of LINC's Washington operations. When questioned, you will declare he was a traitor. It will be assumed the pressure of your work —" He revolved one finger at the side of his head.

"Absurd," Tanner said. "You're the first person they would suspect of—brainwashing, or whatever you call it."

"Not after you deliver a report, also instilled in you by the computers, clearing my operation beyond any reasonable doubt."

"What's the actual operation?"

"A week from Saturday I am giving a party here for members of the diplomatic corps and various government dignitaries. In attendance will be General Walter Stevens."

"Chairman of the joint chiefs of staff," Tanner muttered.

"Exactly. General Stevens will, at the correct time, have consumed a little too much alcohol and be taken to one of my chambers to sleep it off. By Monday morning he will be back at his Pentagon desk. Only his brain will be under the control of the KGB and myself."

Tanner thought to himself for a minute. "What of Miss Harris?"

"My friends in the KGB feel she has information of LINC operations which could be of great value. Several of them will be here tomorrow morning to—question her."

Patti Harris took a deep drink from her water goblet.

Targa pushed his chair away from the table and stood up. He brushed back his coat and took a pistol from his cummerbund. Tanner recognized it as a Walther PP 7.65 mm., which gave him eight shots before reloading became necessary.

"We don't want to keep the doctor waiting," Targa said, glancing at his wristwatch. "Shall we go?"

The sodden, muggy heat outside was almost unbearable after the air-conditioning of the past hours. Tanner, his suit coat over one arm, walked through the darkness beside Patti Harris. Targa, holding the Walther PP, walked several steps behind them.

"The stable on your left," Targa said.

It was one of the stables Tanner had noticed flanked the mansion, as he had arrived. The doors stood open. Targa flicked a wall switch as they entered, illuminating overhead lights.

"No chandeliers," Tanner muttered to Patti Harris.

They walked down an aisle through the middle of the stable. On either side were stalls, many of them containing horses. The floor of the stable was covered with straw. The aisle ended at a partition which Tanner judged to be about in the middle of the building, parallel with the front and rear. They stopped in front of a door, cut into the partition.

"Open it," Targa instructed.

Tanner pushed open the door and stepped into the rear of the stable. It was empty except for some tackle and gear hanging on the walls and a pile of blankets in one corner. Targa pulled the door closed behind himself and Patti Harris. Still levelling the Walther at Tanner's stomach, he bent down and pressed against the partition, about a foot above the floor.

The sound of a motor was accompanied by a section of the straw-covered floor rolling away to reveal a dark hole with a ladder protruding from it.

"You first, Mr. Tanner."

At the bottom of the metal ladder was another wall, this one steel, with a door in it. Marrack Targa walked up to a small microphone, recessed in the windowless wall, and identified himself to whomever was inside. Tanner recognized the language as Russian. After several clangs from within, the door swung open and they stepped inside. The door closed behind them.

The room was large and metallic-looking, obviously sound-proofed. Tanner had heard no sound of humming machinery from outside the wall. The computer installation occupied three sides of the perimeter of the room. In the center was a large, steel chair with numerous straps and wires leading to various components of the equipment.

The effect was similar to an electrocution seat. A small, box-like

control room with two windows faced the chair. Standing beside the chair was a slender man with greased, gray hair, a mustache and a complexion like mildewed paper. His arms were folded across the front of a white, surgical gown.

"Mr. Tanner, Miss Harris, this is Dr. Davshinsky. Recently of Moscow," Targa added with a grin.

The Russian looked at the girl, then at Tanner, smiling without humor. Tanner ignored him, his eyes darting about the machinery, trying to record in his brain a clear picture of the set-up for future reference. Patti Harris braced herself against a section of the equipment. Her expression was a mixture of bewilderment and terror approaching nausea.

"Now, if you will be seated, we can get ahead with this," Targa said briskly to Tanner. "I assure you there will be no pain. After the first eighty-five seconds, you will be in a comatose state for the remainder of your indoctrination." Targa said something in Russian to the technician, who entered the booth and closed the door behind him. He peered out the window at the others.

"I believe I'm entitled to a last cigarette," Tanner said.

Targa took a cigarette from the inside of his formal jacket, lighted it and handed it to Tanner. As he drew the smoke into his lungs and exhaled, Tanner glanced at the control booth. The technician, his

back to the window, was fiddling with some control knobs.

This was it. There would be no more chances, once he was strapped in that ominous chair. He took another drag, slowly extended the cigarette to arm's length and flipped it at Targa's face.

Targa's free hand flew to his face an instant too late; the cigarette struck an inch below the eye and fell to the floor. Targa's instinctive shot was aimed where Tanner had been standing. But Tanner had leaped as he flipped the cigarette and the shell whistled over his shoulder. He slammed into Targa, hitting between gun arm and body. The two men toppled backward, Targa trying to jam the mouth of the Walther against Tanner's twisting body. Targa fell to his knees, then flat on his back with Tanner atop him.

Tanner frantically grabbed the hand gripping the pistol and slammed it against the floor. Targa's fingers popped open reflexively as pain shot from them into his arm. The Walther clattered several feet across the floor. Tanner leaped, landing flat on his stomach with his hands on the pistol.

Patti Harris, seeing a flutter of movement out of the corner of her eye, looked up from the writhing bodies to the window of the control room. The Russian technician reached below the level of the window and came up with a pistol. Patti looked desperately about her

for something to throw. The Russian was sighting the pistol at Christopher Tanner, who was grabbing for the Walther. Patti clawed one high-heeled pump from her foot and heaved it at the window of the booth. The technician's head jerked as the shoe bounced off the glass. There was a sharp clap behind her and suddenly a small black hole appeared in the Russian's forehead.

Patti Harris watched hypnotically as the technician dropped below window level. Hearing the second shot, she jerked to see Tanner fire twice more from his position prone on the floor. Targa crumpled, face first, to the ground. Gurgling sounds came from his shaved head, as if he was crying. The front of his black jacket was splotted red.

"Come on," said Tanner, already on his feet. He shoved the Walther into his trouser pocket and handed Patti her shoe. "I'll thank you properly later." He unbarred the door and opened it.

Tanner pulled her out of the room and up the ladder. The sliding floor had slid back into place over the opening. Tanner ran his hand over the bottom of the floor, then over the sides of the ladder where he found the switch. The hatch slid open and they climbed into the stable.

"How many people does Targa have in this place and where are they this time of day?"

"About eight, I believe. They all have covers as cooks or valets or something. This time of the evening they're usually all in the house, playing cards or watching television."

"Wait here."

Tanner stepped through the door in the partition into the front part of the stable. The light Targa had turned on was still burning. Patti Harris watched Tanner walk to the front of the stable, peer out the open door, then come back to the partition.

"My car is in the driveway, but the whole front of the house is lighted up. Does Targa have any watchmen?"

"The men inside take turns watching the grounds from inside."

"Then we've got to draw them out of the house."

Tanner pressed the partition to open the false floor and disappeared down the ladder. A moment later he reappeared with Targa's cigarette lighter. He stepped into the front of the stable, picked up some straw and fired it with the lighter. Tanner tossed the flaming sheaf of straw onto a pile of hay in the rear corner of the stable. Flames exploded on contact.

"Open the stalls," Tanner shouted.

In less than fifteen seconds the gates to the stalls containing horses were unlatched and open. The animals neighed nervously, snorted

and moved around inside the stalls. Hearing shouts, Tanner looked outside. Several men were running across the field between the stable and the house.

"Get them out—fast," Tanner yelled to the girl.

Cracking flames were climbing the stable walls. The straw-covered floor was a sheet of flames and the rear stalls were now burning. They guided the horses out of the stalls and into the aisle. The animals jammed together, then began to break into a run.

Tanner boosted Patti Harris up on a bay, the second from last horse in the aisle. She locked her arms around the animal's neck.

"Not too tight," Tanner barked. "And keep flat against his back. Don't bother guiding him; he'll know where to go."

Tanner slapped the bay's flank and swung up on the last horse, a gray-white stallion, as it galloped out of the flaming stable. The frightened animals kept close together as they raced across the dark meadow, passing within thirty feet of the bewildered group, who stood watching them.

Tanner heard shouts and knew the men had spotted Patti and himself. He fired the four remaining shells at the group and tossed away the empty Walther.

More shouts were followed by several shots. The animal in front of Tanner dropped to the ground with a snort. Tanner's stallion



leaped the fallen animal. The herd passed the side of the mansion, crossed the front lawn and started across the lighted driveway in front of the portico.

"Jump," Tanner yelled.

He pushed himself hard with his left foot against the horse to avoid getting trampled by the pounding feet. Tanner landed in a crouch, then lost his balance and fell to the gravel. Leaping to his feet, Tanner saw the girl jump awkwardly from her horse and land in a heap on the lawn.

"Get up. Get to the car." But she didn't move.

The horses were now pounding down across the dark lawn circled by the driveway, toward the road. Tanner ran to the XKE, still parked beside the truck. He

yanked open the door and looked inside. No keys in the ignition. He fumbled his hand over the door panel, pulled open the compartment and took out the .357 Magnum.

The front door burst open and a man holding a shotgun ran on to the porch. He sighted Patti Harris, stumbling to her feet and shaking her head groggily. Tanner fired twice over the rear fender of the XKE as the man was bringing the shotgun in line with the girl. The shells hit him high on the chest, slamming him back against the side of the house. The shotgun clattered to the floor of the portico.

Tanner pulled open the door of the pick-up truck parked beside the Jaguar. The keys were in the ignition. He leaped behind the wheel and turned the key, relishing the feel of the cool metal in his fingers and the grinding, then rumbling of the engine. Patti Harris was running across the driveway to the truck as Tanner pushed open the passenger's door. He pulled her into the truck.

As Tanner popped the clutch, stones sprayed from beneath the rear wheels. The truck lurched down the driveway. Tanner shifted quickly into second gear.

Two men coming around the side of the house dropped to their knees and began firing pistols at the truck. A shell ricocheted off a side panel of the truck bed. Tanner swung the truck out of the drive-

way on to the road with the accelerator flat to the floor. The rear tires pumped like pneumatic hammers; the truck fishtailed several times. Tanner now switched on the lights. He glanced in the mirror, keeping the gas pedal floored, but he was not being followed.

Patti Harris was leaning against the door, her head in her hands, seeming dazed. Looking past her, through the window, Tanner could see the flaming stable. Silhouetted figures were running against the yellow background of the flames.

Tanner kept the truck pegged at seventy for several miles. Once, seeing approaching headlights in the rear-view mirror, he swung off onto the shoulder, turned off the lights and pushed the girl flat on the seat, covering her with his body. The car, a convertible load of raucous teenagers, passed them with horn blaring.

Patti, prone on the seat, held Tanner tightly, even after the car was well past. She sobbed softly, then he kissed her mouth hard. Her body softened under his and she responded to his mouth.

Tanner drove at the legal limit, one arm around Patti's shoulders.

"There's just about enough gas in this bucket to get us to Baltimore," Tanner said after a while. "Then we'll find another bar. I think we have a lot to talk about. Without codes."

Patti's answering smile was enough.



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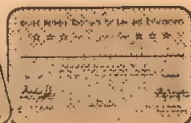
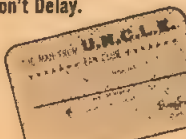
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*They were alone, young, madly in love and
bound for their honeymoon—with a shadowy,
uninvited house guest—Trackless Murder!*



DEATH IS MY BRIDEGROOM

by EDWIN P. HICKS



JOE CHAVISKI read about it in the morning *American*—how little Alice Howard and her husband of less than an hour had gone over the cliff at Inspiration Point and been killed. He could hardly eat his breakfast because of the lump in his throat.

Alice had lived in a garage apartment across the street, and although he had done no more than nod his head to her in the eighteen months that she had lived there, he liked the girl and felt that they were of a kindred spirit.

They both lived alone—Joe because his beloved Lucy had been gone several years now, and Alice because she had no relatives at all and was just starting out in life. But Joe knew a lot about Alice from Mrs. Gresham, from whom she rented the apartment. The girl had been an orphan. She had

come to town and her job on an assembly line at Borg-Warner directly from high school in Kansas City.

In the eighteen months she had lived in the apartment, she had conducted herself as a lady in every way, had paid her rent on the first of the month right on the dot, and had entertained very few friends.

She was a little on the reserved side, perhaps, but she had always been pleasant and agreeable.

A few months after leasing the apartment, she had bought a five-year-old car. She had cooked her morning and evening meals in the apartment and took her lunch with her to work. Her only recreation, as far as Mrs. Gresham knew, was a trip to the movies once a week, or maybe a drive after work. Her drives into the country frequently

were to Inspiration Point, some twenty miles east of the city, where she would watch the sunset.

All in all, Alice Howard was a fine young woman, an attractive girl with a sweet smile, and she had a nice way about her.

Joe Chaviski struck the top of the dinette table so hard with his fist that coffee spilled from his mug.

"Hell!" he said.

Then he went over to see Mrs. Gresham, an old lady living on Social Security and on the rent from the garage apartment.

"What kind of a guy was this fellow Henry Crozier?" Joe asked, after Mrs. Gresham's weeping had subsided.

"I guess he was nice enough, Joe. He must have been or Alice never would have married him. But I talked to him only once or twice. He first started visiting Alice about three months ago. She brought him in and introduced him to me on their first date, just like I was her mother. I liked him all right, only for one thing."

"What was that?"

"He was a small man, with a hair-line mustache. To me he seemed a little effeminate. But I could see Alice liked him a lot, poor girl. I really think he was her first date. And then you know how big and strong my Fred was—six feet two, with arms on him like a blacksmith. My sons are all over six feet, you know. I always liked big men, Joe, just like your Lucy

did. Many's the time Lucy and I talked about how proud we were of our big, strong husbands.

"Lucy was like a daughter to me, you know. Long long ago, when you two were first married—just like little Alice was a daughter to me."

She began crying again, and Joe got up to leave.

On the steps, however, he turned back. "Who owned the car?"

"It was Alice's. She loved that little car. It was the first one she ever owned, of course, and she had just paid it out."

"Mrs. Gresham, I don't want to bother you at a time like this, but where did Crozier work? What did he do?"

"I don't know. Alice never really told me. I got the idea somewhere that he worked in a store downtown, but I don't know where it was."

"Did you go to the wedding, Mrs. Gresham?"

"No. I didn't even know she was going to get married, but I guess she didn't want me crying around there. She used to say whenever she got ready to marry she didn't want anybody present except the groom and the parson and a couple of witnesses. I thought she was joking, but I guess she was serious. It was night before last, like the paper said. Think of those two young people lying out there in the mountains dead a whole night and

a day nearly before anyone found them!"

Joe went home then and mowed the lawn. He had planned to hitch his boat and trailer to the car and head for the lake, but the story in the *American* about poor little Alice had upset him. Then too the alarm signal was going off in his brain.

You don't throw off the habits of thirty years on the police force, ten of them as chief of detectives, very easily. Alice Howard had always smiled at him. She was a swell girl and had lived across the street. There was no one to look into the circumstances of her death very closely. He ought at least to dig around and see what he could find.

Clear across his forehead it was getting him, telling him something was wrong! Something was wrong about a young bride and bridegroom getting killed within an hour after their wedding. Something was wrong, too, in Alice not telling Mrs. Gresham that they were getting married. And something was wrong about Alice not confiding in Mrs. Gresham about her young man's job—and Mrs. Gresham had said Alice was like a daughter to her. Daughters usually confide in their mothers.

Joe was at the funeral service next day. There were very few in attendance: Mrs. Gresham and one or two of the neighbors in the

block, a dozen or so employes from the plant.

Mrs. Katharine Fisher, Crozier's sister, was the only immediate relative present. Joe knew that it was Mrs. Fisher, from the newspaper story. He studied her closely. She sat in the same seat with Mrs. Gresham, and she cried softly into a handkerchief beneath her dark veil. The caskets were closed.

Joe stood at attention outside the mortuary, while the small cortege formed to leave for the cemetery. Mrs. Gresham was going in a car with friends, so Joe saw no need in going. As he stood there he saw Mrs. Fisher, a young, blonde girl with an attractive figure, get into her car alone.

As she joined the procession, he recognized the car as the one that he had seen parked in the Gresham driveway on the evenings when young Harry Crozier was dating Alice Howard. It was a black, 1964 model Chevrolet sedan. Joe mentally made a note of the license number, then headed for the police station. Funny, he thought, Mrs. Fisher being all alone. Where was her husband at a time like this?

At the police station he got more information on the tragedy. The car had gone off the approach to Inspiration Point, had bounced along for about two hundred yards, then lodged upside down against a boulder and a hickory tree. The body of Crozier had been thrown out halfway of the car,

while that of Alice was inside. The car had not burned. Both victims apparently had died instantly. Both had received multiple bruises and fractures, including fractured skulls.

The physician who had been called by the coroner had held that an autopsy was unnecessary, that death was the result of the head injuries suffered in the accident.

A group of boy scouts on an exploring trip below Inspiration Point had found the bodies in mid-afternoon on the day following the marriage of Henry Crozier and Alice Howard. The marriage ceremony had been performed at 8 P.M. at the home of Justice of the Peace Raymond Clark, in the eastern part of the city.

Officers Rooney and Skelton of the state police, and Deputy Sheriff Woodward had made the investigation and filed their report at the station.

Crozier's sister, Mrs. Katharine Fisher, located through an identification card in Crozier's billfold, had been informed. It was from her it was learned the couple had just been married and were starting on their honeymoon. Crozier's billfold contained only \$25, but there was \$150 in Alice's purse.

Mrs. Fisher had said they were going on a brief honeymoon, perhaps to Hot Springs. They were returning in a few days. Crozier had been working off and on for several months, but Mrs. Fisher didn't

know where. When in town he had stayed at her home. He was planning on going to St. Louis when they had returned from the honeymoon, where he believed he could get a better job.

They had gone by Inspiration Point, his sister said, because Alice had loved the place and she and Henry had gone there many times at night.

Just two romantic kids starting on their honeymoon with only \$175 between them, the young husband out of a steady job, and driving a five-year-old car. Joe sighed as he headed for the police station. It made him think of the silly chances he and Lucy had taken when they started out in life together, he with a policeman's salary of \$80 a month—and only two days off for their honeymoon!

The license number on the Fisher car checked out okay. The license had been issued to James J. Fisher, and the address was a duplex, not far from the Eastern Heights shopping center. The finance company still had title to the car, but everything was in order. Joe called the finance company then, gave his credentials, and found that Fisher was employed in a furniture store downtown.

I'm an idiot, Chaviski kept thinking. A big slob. He was no longer a police officer, and he no longer was supposed to be sticking his big, fat nose into things that didn't concern him. Let poor little

Alice and her young husband, Henry Crozier, rest in peace. No need for him to go poking around, seeking causes and clues when there was no reason for him to do so. He argued with himself all the way to Inspiration Point where he parked his car.

Several other cars were there. People were craning their necks over the white metal bands that formed the protective railing around the point, and looking down at the wreckage of the car visible between the trees, some two hundred yards down the side of the canyon.

Joe had parked his car next to the railing and went back to the approach where the car had gone off. He whistled. The accident report of the state police had not mentioned any skid marks, and there were none! There were no tire tracks on the pavement or in the gravel on the shoulder, no ruts in the dirt where fast turning wheels would have dug in. People had been at the scene, of course—too many people.

But a fast moving car going off the approach and into the ditch beneath and between the protective railing and the beginning of the canyon would have left deep marks as it went off the pavement. Definitely, this accident didn't look right to Chaviski.

It was criminal to upset himself that way. There was a good chance that a helicopter would have to be

put in use to get him back up the side of the canyon, but Joe began lowering himself—all 255 pounds—down the side of the steep gorge, following the route the death car had taken.

Twenty-five feet down, the hurtling machine had gashed a black-jack oak tree and had taken a deep bite out of the gray soil. From there on rocks had been knocked loose, small pines had been snapped off or bent over, a hollow log had been smashed, and there were numerous deep gouges in the earth.

Slipping, sliding, groaning, Joe finally made it down to the wrecked car. A man stepped from behind a tree. "Oh, it's you, Joe. I thought it was a bear coming down the mountain-side." The man was Stewart Holden, a deputy constable.

"What you doing here?" Joe asked.

"Guarding this wreck until the insurance dicks get to look it over."

"Insurance? How much insurance did they have?"

"Don't know Joe, but I think it was plenty."

"What company?"

"The Acme and I think Republic."

"Mind if I look things over?"

"Joe, they don't want nobody touching nothing."

"Okay," said Joe, "I won't touch a thing."

He looked into the car at two

suitcases. One of the suitcases was burst open, a woman's silken things were strewn over the back seat. A little white Bible was partly visible beneath the lace of a slip. Joe was conscious of a lump in his throat again as he looked at the clothing and the Bible.

Lucy had carried a little white Testament at their wedding. Weddings were such a big thing to a girl. Lucy had kept that little white Testament all the years of their marriage. Now it rested on top of her sweet scented clothing in a cedar chest at home. He would never part with it.

With many stops for breathing, Joe Chaviski dragged his body back up the side of the canyon and to his car. Insurance! Insurance for whom? Joe didn't know much about modern kids, but when he was a young man getting married he and Lucy hadn't thought about insurance. That came sometime later, usually after the arrival of the first baby. After a young man got socked squarely between the eyes by reality and saw that if he were playing the role of a husband and father he had better act like one.

Insurance! Joe sat there for a long time and looked off at the carpet of green trees, the gray crags which were like knots in a floor, at the blue haze that veiled the rest of the valley and softened the coloring of the distant hills.

Insurance? How much? A thou-

sand dollars or so might just be common sense the kids were showing at the beginning of their honeymoon and their married life. But if it were an overly large amount of insurance, and Stewart Holden, the deputy constable had said he thought it was, why things didn't ring right. Just as the physical facts of the accident didn't ring right either.

The next morning Joe walked out of the house and leaned his ham of a hand against the bow of his fishing boat, which was named *Lucy*. The twenty-five-horse outboard was already in place, with its canvas covering over it to protect it.

All he had to do was throw his rods and tackle box into the boat, with a jug of ice water and the makings of some sandwiches, back up his car to the trailer, hook it on and head for the lake.

But the sweet smile of the orphan girl, Alice Howard, kept coming through to him. She had always smiled whenever she saw him, and she had always said, "Good morning Mr. Chaviski. Looks like it is going to be a lovely day, doesn't it?", or "Good evening Mr. Chaviski. Hope you had a nice day."

Joe cursed. The old police alarm bell was ringing louder than ever in his head!

Joe turned his back on the boat, got in his car and hurried downtown. A heaping dish of vanilla

ice cream at the Broadway made him feel better. After chatting with a few of the coffee drinkers in the restaurant he drifted over to the Acme Insurance Agency, off Court Street. Jerry Lanier, the local agent, introduced him to Charlie Hamilton, a special investigator from the Acme general office in New York. He had just flown into town.



"You can talk in front of Chaviski," Jerry said. "He was our chief of detectives with the police department for many years."

"Little Alice Howard was a neighbor of mine," Joe said. "Maybe I can help."

"What kind of a person was Alice?" Hamilton asked.

"The finest kind of a girl," said Joe. "Never knew her to do anything wrong in the eighteen months she lived across the street from me."

"And Henry Crozier?"

"Didn't know the guy. Used to see his car parked across the street, now and then. Or rather he was

driving his sister's car. Mrs. Katharine Fisher."

"This Mrs. Fisher—what kind of a person is she?"

"I saw her for the first time at the funeral. Don't know a thing about her."

"Doesn't it seem strange to you that a young bride like Alice Howard would take out twenty-five thousand dollars life insurance payable, to her husband-to-be, or to his sister, Mrs. Katharine Fisher, in the event of his death? And of course there was a double indemnity clause in case it was an accidental death."

Joe snorted.

"And doesn't it seem strange to you that this so serious-minded Henry Crozier, just a few days before his wedding, would take out a twenty-five thousand dollar policy from the Republic Company, also with the double indemnity clause for accidental death—payable to his bride-to-be, or in the event of her death to his beloved sister, Mrs. Katharine Fisher?"

Joe was seeing pretty little Alice Howard, tripping out to her white car.

"They *did* take out the policies," Hamilton was continuing, "and they did pay the first premiums. Our companies will have to make good, unless—"

"Count me in," Joe said. "Anything I can do, I'll do."

"There must have been undue influence on both of them from

some interested person. It seems to me that the interested person might have been one Mrs. Katharine Fisher."

"The insurance angle is your angle," said Joe Chaviski. "But if that little girl was murdered, that's where I mix in."

"Glad to have your help," said Thompson.

"You're going to the scene of the accident?"

"Yes, in a few minutes."

"No tracks, no skid marks, and no crash through the railing," Joe said with meaning.

"Quite interesting," said Hamilton.

Joe left them and went by the Brothers Furniture Store. He wanted a chat with Jim Fisher. Sandy Brothers, store manager, informed him that Fisher had quit his job the week before.

"He was a good salesman," Brothers said. "He'd been working here about six months. Came from St. Louis, I think. Talked himself into a job and I raised him at the end of the first month. Made good commissions. But he got married a couple of months after he started here, and if you ask me that was a mistake. I could tell things weren't going right."

"Don't know a thing about the young woman he married but she was down here right on the dot every payday, and she took everything he made. Don't think she allowed him more than a dollar a

week of his own. I think his wife is responsible for him quitting. She probably wanted him to go to St. Louis."

"You know where he was to work in St. Louis?"

"No. I don't think he had a job there—just hoped to get one."

"You know his brother-in-law, Henry Crozier, was killed in that accident at Inspiration Point."

"Sad thing, wasn't it? That young couple!"

"Sure was. And you know I don't believe Jim knows a thing about the accident yet. He and his wife were witnesses at the wedding, and then he must have left next day for St. Louis. He wasn't at the funeral. Ever know Crozier, Sandy?"

"Saw him once, I think. Dark little fellow with eyebrow mustache. Came to the store with Katie. It was payday, like I said."

"Does Fisher have any other relatives?"

"No. He doesn't have a soul in the world except his wife. He was an orphan boy. Brought up in a St. Louis orphanage."

"Well I'll be damned," said Joe.

"What's the matter?"

"Alice was an orphan too. Seems like Henry and Katharine went for orphans."

Joe drove back home and backed his car up to the boat and trailer. An afternoon of fishing would give him a chance to maybe clarify some of the parts of this jigsaw puzzle. And then too he need-

n't have a guilty conscience about not boring into the thing, because Charlie Hamilton, the insurance investigator, was working on the case.

So he got out of his car—and walked straight across the street and rang the bell at Mrs. Gresham's front door. It took several minutes, but finally the old lady answered the bell.

"So it's you, Joe. Why didn't you come around to the back of the house? You know where I stay."

"I was wondering, Mrs. Gresham, if you'd mind me looking through Alice's apartment. There might be some things both of us need to know."

She motioned Joe to follow her, led the way to the back bedroom, where she picked up a set of keys from a dresser drawer, and then she went heavily up the outer steps to the apartment above the garage.

The apartment was like Alice Howard, neat, clean, appealing. The living room was attractively but inexpensively furnished; the kitchenette was clean and shining. The bedroom was all white, with white, billowy curtains on the windows. There was a gay, red pillow propped up against the center of the headboard of the bed. On a stand was a picture of a smiling, dark-haired, dark-eyed young man. The suggestion of a mustache told Joe who he was.

Mrs. Gresham nodded towards the picture.

"That is poor Henry," she said. "He was a little fellow, like I told you. Notice those dimples in his cheeks. He was all right, I guess, but like I said, he wouldn't have attracted me if I had been a young girl."

They went back into the living room. A small bookcase was at the end of the divan. A vase of artificial flowers stood on top of the bookcase, and next to the vase was a picture album. Joe picked up the album and began turning through it. There were gay snapshots of Alice and Crozier, which had been made on picnics, and at least one or two of these had been taken at Inspiration Point.

Once or twice the two of them had been snapped together. Then there was a picture of Katharine Fisher and Henry Crozier together, and still another picture of Mrs. Fisher, Crozier, and another man. The other man, according to notations inked at the bottom of the page, was Jim Fisher, Katharine's husband.

"I'd like to borrow this album for a while, Mrs. Gresham," Joe said.

It was early that afternoon that Joe Chaviski, deep in a dish of vanilla ice cream at Martin's drugstore, began to tie his ideas to fragments of reason.

The one clear picture was Mrs. Katherine Fisher. And Jim Fisher, too, obviously must be tied in with her. Jim was gone—mysteriously gone after the wedding and before

the bodies were found below Inspiration Point. It could be that he was perfectly innocent and was off looking for a job in St. Louis without knowing about the tragedy. And then there could be other interpretations.

The deaths of Alice and Henry Crozier would enrich Mrs. Fisher by the tune of \$100,000. The whole thing screamed out murder—cold-hearted, premeditated murder. And only one or two people could be involved. Mrs. Katharine Fisher and her husband.

A car doesn't go off an embankment and plunge two hundred yards down the side of a mountain, carrying two people with it, without leaving skidding tire marks on the pavement. And two live people don't sit in a car and let it roll them gently into eternity. And it isn't often that two young honeymooners provide \$100,000 in insurance for the sister of the bridegroom!

What about Jim Fisher? They hadn't known much about him at the furniture store. Wait! The county clerk's office would have some information. Joe got in his car and drove to the county building. Hal Smith, the county clerk, dug out the records on the marriage license issued to James J. Fisher, 25, birthplace St. Louis, Mo., and Katharine Ann Lowe, 24, birthplace Talbot, Okla. It had been issued three months before. He then had a look at the recording of the Crozier-Howard marriage license,

on which the ink was barely dry. There it was, Alice Howard, 19, birthplace Kansas City, Mo.; Henry Crozier, 25, birthplace St. Louis, Mo.

Okay, Joe thought. So what? So the boy was going back to his home town to get a job after his honeymoon, just like he said. But if Mrs. Fisher's birthplace was Talbot, Oklahoma, and her maiden name had been Lowe, and her brother's name was Crozier and his birthplace was St. Louis, they were only half-brother and half-sister. There had been some fast moving around, some fast separating or marrying or something, for all this to happen so quickly. So it *could* have happened. And then there could be some loose ends which might bear investigating.

It was now after three and Talbot, a little town of 3,500 population, was fifty miles west. There was a chance that he might learn something over at Talbot. Joe decided that he just might do a little quiet nosing around over there. Exactly at four, big Joe Chaviski was having a dish of delicious vanilla ice cream at the soda counter in Durham's Drug Store, on Talbot's Main Street.

At five minutes after four he was engaged in friendly conversation with Conrad Durham, pharmacist and the owner of the store. Conrad had admitted he "loved" to fish but somehow never got out much anymore. Whereupon Joe invited him

to give him a ring any time over at Fort Sanders and he'd take him out and show him some real Arkansas fishing.

And then Joe sprang his joker. He pulled out the picture of Katharine Fisher, James Fisher, and Henry Crozier. "The girl says she was born in Talbot; you don't happen to know her, do you?"

"Know her? Sure I know her. That's Katharine Ann Lowe. Lived all her life until just a couple of years ago right here in Talbot. And there's Henry Lowe, her brother. We were sure relieved when they pulled out of here."

"You say this is her brother, Henry Lowe?" said Joe.

"Sure is. Had to run him out of this drug store a hundred times when he was in high school here. Steal the money right out of the cash register. And Katie wasn't any better either. That's Henry all right, only he's sprouted a little go-to-hell mustache."

"That's funny," said Joe. "He went by the name of Henry Crozier over in Fort Sanders."

"Not funny if you knew the tribe. What could you expect of them? The whole family's mean. Smart enough, all of them, but they'd do anything for money. Take Katie there. She was the blackmailingest little filly this town ever saw. Several of the boys who had been chasing her had to leave town. Her old man would try to

collect for a pay-off, and he'd do his collecting with a shotgun.

"Henry tried it a time or two, but he got knocked on his rear. He always was just a little squirt of a fellow but meaner than hell. What's happened to them, Mr. Chaviski? Trouble, I bet."

Joe had to be evasive. "Doing a little special investigating about an insurance premium."

"Uh huh, that figures. Henry tried to organize a protection racket in Talbot, but he didn't get anywhere. Always had big ideas. Went to St. Louis from here. Didn't know he was over in your town, or Katharine either. But you can keep them."

Joe Chaviski saw no reason to burn up the road between Talbot and Fort Sanders because he had some deep thinking to do. The harder he thought the slower he drove. In fact, halfway home he pulled off the side of the road and battled it out.

A young bride and bridegroom go over a cliff less than an hour after their marriage. Both leave \$50,000 in insurance to the sister of the bridegroom. The sister of the bridegroom is a blackmailer and comes from a bad family. The bridegroom is married under the name of Crozier, when his real name is Lowe. The bridegroom was a thief and a potential insurance racketeer. And yet the bridegroom went over the cliff with his bride!

Then as the lowering sun cast its

reflected light from Joe's rear-view mirror squarely into his face, an inner light lit up his brain. He headed straight for the funeral home which had handled Alice and Henry's funeral.

A few minutes later Judd Orri-son, the funeral home director, was shaking his head. "No," he said, "*this* is Henry Crozier. His sister identified the body, you know. Why Joe?"

Joe returned the photograph to his pocket. "Haven't got time to tell you right now, Judd. Be back pretty soon though."

With his old police radio he called the station and had them catch Judge Ben Brockman and Prosecuting Attorney Richard Anderson before they left their offices. Within fifteen minutes he had the judge's order to exhume the body of Henry Crozier.

Not without a bit of trouble, though.

"I hope you know what you're doing," the judge had said dubiously. People are funny, Joe. They want the dead let alone. Unless you're pretty sure, take it easy. You'll live longer."

"That's my worry," Joe said. "Sign it, judge. It's my funeral."

Later that evening, after the body was exhumed, Sandy Brothers identified the body of "Henry Crozier" as that of James Fisher, Katharine Fisher's husband!

Within an hour after this identification, an autopsy had been or-

dered on Fisher's body, a second order had been issued to exhume the body of Alice Howard and an autopsy to be performed—and Katharine Fisher had been arrested on a charge of murder. Confronted with the evidence, she broke immediately, admitted the murders of Alice Howard and her husband, James Fisher, and told where her brother, Henry Lowe, could be picked up in Tulsa.

Henry, she said, had killed Alice, as planned, by striking her from behind with a small crowbar, as she stood filled with love and happiness and looking at the moon rise at Inspiration Point, the first stop on their honeymoon.

Katharine and her husband, Jim Fisher, arrived at the Point a few minutes later, right on schedule for the second murder, as the brother and sister had planned it. Here they were to bid the young couple "good-by" before they started on their trip.

When they reached the scene, Henry had hidden Alice's body inside the car. Greeting Katharine and Jim, he pointed to the left rear wheel of the car, telling Jim something was wrong. When Jim bent over, both Katharine and Henry struck the man, Katharine also wielding a small crowbar which she had hidden under the seat. They struck Jim several times to make sure of the job. Then they lifted Jim's body and tumbled it into the Valiant.

They drove the car to the approach at the end of the railing, pointed it towards the side of the canyon wall, put the engine in neutral, released the brakes, and got out of the car with the motor running. Henry then reached in from the side and simply pressed the "drive" button, and the car went over the cliff. The sister and brother then returned to town, where Henry boarded a bus for Tulsa.

"We had always wanted to make big money all our lives," Katharine said. "We picked Jim and the girl, because both of them had no relatives to bother us. We figured nobody would kick up much of a mess about them. The folks at the funeral home didn't know Jim and hardly anybody in town had ever seen Henry, not more than three or four people at most. And of course, we instructed the mortuary not to let the public see the body. We didn't see how we could fail to collect the insurance. With obvious head

injuries, no autopsy was indicated."

"They might have got by with it too," said Charlie Hamilton, the insurance investigator. "I felt all the time it was murder, but they had things pretty well covered up. If they had got away with it there is no telling what they would have done next. The only thing they didn't figure on was that poor little Alice Howard had a smile that won the heart of a sentimental old former cop who lived across the street."

He shook Joe Chaviski's ham of a hand. "Good boy, Joe. I think two insurance companies I know can sweeten your tea a little for that job."

Joe Chaviski smiled. He would use the money, whatever they gave him, to help some little orphan kid along the way when the opportunity arose.

Alice Howard would like that, he knew.



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RETIREMENT

FUND

It was only a madman's dream, she told herself. But then, one dark night—what—what if, after all, it were real?

by Gordon R. Prescott

MISS BAKER sighed, stifled a delicate yawn, and glanced at her watch. Two-thirty. Another half hour before she made her rounds again. All of her patients would be asleep, except maybe Mr. Armbruster, who thought he was an astronomer. As usual, he would be star-gazing.

Her fingers touched at the stiff white of her nurse's cap, settling it down into its nest of fluffy brown hair. She picked up the boring novel she'd been plodding through because it was a best-seller.

"Boo!"

Her heart lurched, and she almost dropped her book.

"Mr. Ross!" Her usually soothing tone was high-pitched. "Mr.



Ross, why aren't you in bed?" she demanded, finally finding her mildly authoritative, mildly disapproving professional manner.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to frighten you. Dry run," he whispered, glancing quickly around. With a wave of his hand he indicated his black sweater, trousers, and tennis shoes.

Miss Baker's face went blank for an instant. Then she remembered—it was time again for Mr. Ross's casing of the office. Each month about this time he cracked—she thought that was the right word—the office safe.

"Okay," she whispered back. "Good luck. But don't stay up too long."

He nodded, winked a blue eye at her, and padded silently down the hall.

She smiled and lit a cigarette. Smoking on duty wasn't really allowed. But at two forty-five in the morning . . .

Poor Mr. Ross! The Cat Man, he called himself. Probably a nickname he'd gleaned from all those mystery stories in his room. Safe-cracker extraordinary. Sounded like a theater billing.

Well, he was harmless enough. In fact, she rather liked him, poor thing! A thick shock of white hair, the clearest, deepest blue eyes she'd ever seen. Tall and thin—more athletic and alert than a man half his seventy-odd years.

She let smoke trickle upward.

Mr. Ross's medical history filtered through her mind. He was seventy-one, in good health, mentally alert and responsive. The only discordant note was the delusion about being a safe-cracker. And there was something about its being brought on by a business failure.

The poor soul! He was alone and had a little money, even asked his doctor to recommend him for Briarlee Manor. And except for these monthly night wanderings, she couldn't ask for a better patient.

It had been the same for the past eight or nine months. About this time of the month he robbed the safe of Briarlee Manor. Only it wasn't the real safe—just an old one that wouldn't lock.

When he made his dry run, as he called it, Miss Baker left a note for the day shift to roll the old safe out of storage, stock it with play money and five and ten jewelry, and keep clear the following night.

Briarlee Manor could afford to be indulgent. It was a very exclusive "rest home," and none of the patients were violent.

Only one or two of the very posh rooms (suites, they were called) were ever locked, and no bars were to be found anywhere. And the words *insane* and *asylum* were strictly never used, as she'd been told so often when she first started work.

She wrote the note about Mr. Ross and stuck it in the day super-

visor's box. She'd always wondered what happened to the junk Mr. Ross took from the safe, but somehow it all found its way back for the next time.

"Boo again!"

Her pen clattered to the floor. She hadn't even heard him.

"Mr. Ross! If you don't—" But she couldn't allow herself to scold him. "Can't you make just a little noise?"

He picked up her pen and returned it to her with a continental flourish.

"I won't do it any more. Promise!" But his eyes held their usual playful twinkle.

"Was everything all right?" she stage whispered in mock seriousness.

"Slick as a whistle. This is my last big job, you know. My retirement fund."

"Uh-hunh." She nodded at the familiar words, but she was careful to make it sound like it was all new.

"Takes a lot of planning. Been casing the job for months." He tapped significantly at his head. "Got the whole office layout memorized, right down to the last waste basket."

Her lips formed a perfectly rounded O.

His eyes narrowed and he searched her face.

"Say, you wouldn't be thinking of squealing on me?"

"Mr. Ross!" She looked around



in feigned alarm. "I thought we were friends!"

"Just wanted to be sure." He touched her shoulder lightly. "Can't be too careful, you know."

"You're forgiven," but the smile that was spreading on her face froze. The half bantering twinkle was gone from her eyes, and for a moment he looked so intense, so—so rational.

"How would you like a change of scenery? There'd be enough for both of us. I'm an old man. Not much time left. Need someone to look after me a little." His eyes almost pleaded with her.

It was the one part of the monthly ritual that was always so disturbing. The wording was a little different each time, but the invitation was so sincere. She forced a laugh.

"I'd love to, Mr. Ross. But I can't leave my patients. You should know that. Mr. Armbruster—he needs his warm milk after working so hard all night. And Mr. Billings has those horrible nightmares. And Mr. Forst is coming back tomorrow for a while. You remember Mr. Forst?" She felt in control of herself again.

For an instant she fancied his face had hardened, mask-like.

"Logan P. Forst, investment millionaire, and not an honest dollar in the lot!"

It came out with a certain bitterness. Then the twinkle-eyed banter reappeared. "Seems I read about him somewhere."

Again that moment of seeming to be completely normal. She'd never gotten over it, even after working with mental patients for over two years.

"Thank you for your offer, though. It was kind of you. But you are quite a bit older—" She tried to calculate the distance between twenty-three and seventy-one. Not that it really made any difference.

"You're right, of course."

His glance dropped to the desk. The strangely lonely quality in his voice reached out to her. She searched in vain for the right combination of consoling words . . .

"Must get to bed. Busy day tomorrow. Night." He turned abruptly and was gone.

"Good night, Mr. Ross," she said softly, the slight catch in her voice coming as a surprise.

"It was difficult sometimes—not getting involved, that is. They were pathetically—well, appealing, like children.

She stabbed out her cigarette and ran a delicate finger down her patient list. She had twelve rooms on her wing, but only ten were occupied. The eleventh and twelfth

were reserved for Mr. Forst, who would be checking in tomorrow for his semi-annual cigarless, drinkless, and womenless two weeks. She allowed herself an unprofessional grimace of distaste.

Taking a flashlight from a drawer of the oversized reception desk, Miss Baker went to the end of the carpeted, panelled hall. In each room she directed a subdued beam at the bed and its sleeping occupant.

For a change, Mr. Billings was free from his usual nightmares, his cherubic face wreathed in a smile.

Mr. Armbruster's scraggly neck, however, was bent up toward his telescope. She closed the door behind her quietly.

Mr. Ross had the last room. Her flashlight swept the bookcase-lined wall, the portable stereo, the two or three really nice paintings he prized.

His eyes were closed, his white hair askew on the pillow. She tucked the blanket up around him—the room was just a little chilly—and on a sudden impulse she bent over and kissed his forehead.

Back at the desk her hand encircled the phone.

"West three," she reported mechanically, "three o'clock check, all quiet."

A sleepy voice grunted something at her and she hung up. She made a face at the book in front of her, set her jaw in defiance, and began to read.

"REALLY, Mr. Forst, you're being quite difficult!" Miss Baker, entrenched cautiously behind an armchair, her hand on the door knob, felt herself becoming hysterical. "You *must* turn down the T.V.! And you know no alcoholic beverages are allowed at Briarlee!"

The fat bald head, its pig-like eyes riveted to a late movie, grunted without moving.

"Just bring some more ice, honey. And skip the lecture."

She slammed through the door and back to her desk, furious. Every six months it was the same, until he used up the supply of liquor and cigars he smuggled in. With deft hands she patted her cap back in place and smoothed down her uniform, where his grubby, slimy hands—

"Troubles?" a voice asked quietly.

She looked up, startled.

"Mr. Ross. No, I—one of the guests isn't resting comfortably." She tried not to let her irritation show.

"It's Mr. Forst, isn't it?" he nodded sagely. "He's had the whole floor in an uproar since he checked in. If there's anything I can do—"

"You're a darling," she smiled, "but no thank you. Just go back to bed and—"

"Can't." He leaned closer to her ear. "Tonight's the big night." His eyes danced with mischief. "My—uh—invitation of last night still stands, y'know."

"Don't tempt me!" she said bitterly. She opened the refrigerator behind her. "But I have to get Mr. Forst's ice before he wakes up the whole place. Anyway, good luck."

Mr. Ross melted silently down the hall. He was dressed in black again, and wearing those incredibly noiseless tennis shoes. Only tonight, she half noticed, he was carrying a battered black briefcase.

She broke a handful of ice cubes into a pitcher and took them to Mr. Forst.

"These are the last you get tonight." She placed them none too gently on the night table beside his bed. "And you might have the decency to cover yourself up!"

Mr. Forst chuckled, his plump head swiveling on its rolls of fat, the chuckle rippling down his tub-like hairy chest to his undershorts. He patted the bed beside him with a chubby palm.

"Good movie, honey. Doncha wanta watch it? I won't tell!" His grunt-like laugh rippled over him.

She fled from the room.

Her hand shaking in anger, she lit another cigarette. Her fourth this evening, and it wasn't even two-thirty yet. She hadn't even made her two o'clock rounds!

She checked the floor somewhat hastily. Mr. Armbruster, not the least bothered by the commotion, was bent under his telescope, and for the second night in a row Mr. Billings slept soundly.

In Mr. Ross's room the bed was

still neatly made, a packed suitcase lying open on the spread, ready for his "getaway." Thank heavens everything else was normal!

Back at the desk she called in her report and took a last deep, gratifying drag on her cigarette before stabbing it out. She carefully emptied the ash tray before hiding it in the bottom drawer.

"Hi, I'm back," a voice said softly.

"Mr. Ross!" she gulped, though she'd thought she'd be used to it by this time. "You promised—" and then her heart began to beat again.

"Oh. Sorry about that. Habit of the profession, you know."

She nodded and looked questioningly at the now-heavy briefcase.

His eyes twinkled as he nodded.

"And is Mr. Forst going to be surprised," he added.

She arched her eyebrows.

"Mr. Forst?"

"Oh yes. Didn't you know? He always carries large sums with him wherever he goes. At least a hundred thousand. For his deals," he confided, leaning close. "It was in the safe. 'Sides, I figure that's about what he owes me, including a lot of interest."

Miss Baker suppressed a smile with difficulty.

"Does he really?"

Mr. Ross nodded. "Took me for about eighty-five thousand four years ago. Every cent I had."

Miss Baker vaguely remembered

something in Mr. Ross's medical record.

"I think you'd better rest—" she started to say.

"Miss Baker," he went on, "my offer still stands. Europe, South America—" He was calmly, softly persistent.

Again that strange feeling—

"If only you—" she began softly.

"—were normal? That's what you intended to say, wasn't it, Miss Baker?" He raised the heavy briefcase to the desk. "See for yourself." The lock snapped.

Really, she told herself, she was letting herself be carried away. There was such a thing as a professional relationship with one's patients.

"Yes, Mr. Ross, you've done quite well this evening," she began quite mechanically, reciting her stock bit of praise, but you really must get—*Mr. Ross!*"

The briefcase, as usual, was full. Bundle after bundle of green bills were crammed helter-skelter into the container. Bundle after bundle of good old green United States currency—

"*That* wasn't what was in—Mr. Ross, where did you—you must put it back!"

"There's a four o'clock plane for Mexico City. If we hurry—"

She stared at him, wide-eyed and frightened. Except it wasn't quite the face of a madman, not any more. The hand that had been

edging for the phone retreated slowly.

A buzzer sounded insistently—once, twice, and then continuously as the button was held down. She glanced quickly at the board. Mr. Forst again!

"Then it wasn't really just—humoring you—as a patient, I mean?" Really, it was all just too incredible!

"That's what everyone was supposed to believe," Mr. Ross answered with his mischievous grin. "Took me four years to catch up

with Logan Forst. Though I can't say I didn't enjoy the last eight months of it." His eyes danced.

"But the play money—"

"Oh, I dumped that in Mr. Forst's attaché case before I relocked the safe. Now, Miss Baker, about that plane—"

She reached down and shut off the buzzer. A grim set came to her mouth when she thought of that flabby animal—

"Let him die of thirst!" she laughed. It would be some sort of justice. "I'll get my coat."

NEXT MONTH'S SENSATIONAL HEADLINER



THE DOLLS OF DEATH AFFAIR

What were they, the fearsome things that came from the skies, trailing death in their wake? While men waited, terror and panic came to nations. Solo and Illya faced a strange, perilous mission: "You must find the dolls of death, whatever the cost. Find them and destroy them—before they destroy us and our world."

A Thrilling New "Man From U.N.C.L.E." Novel

by ROBERT HART DAVIS



BURDEN OF GUILT by NORMAN DANIELS

HOOKED by STEVE APRIL

WHO LIVES BY THE SWORD by ROBERT EDMOND ALTER

THE DROP

a JOHN POND story

He was a hunted man, and he knew it only too well. So—he would be hard to catch . . .

by DANIEL FRENCH



JOHN POND, on counter-espionage assignment, and William Traver, of an ultra secret government organization, pulled to the curb a full block behind the foreign spy they were following. Through night

glasses, John Pond watched the man—who didn't look like a spy at all—enter a tobacco store across the street.

The man came out almost immediately, walked a dozen yards down the street and stopped to light a cigarette while facing the windows of a plate-glass and mirror store.

"Not yet," Pond said. "You're a bit impatient."

"Now look here, John," Traver objected, "this man is a KGB agent and we know it. He has stolen documents he is going to deposit in some drop. We've been following him for two hours. When do we take him?"

"We also want the drop," Pond said.

"And we want the documents in one piece. At least, my department does."

"We'll get them." Pond started the car to follow the spy. "Our man visited a photographer, came out and looked in a furniture store window. He went into a dentist's office, came out and looked into the windows of an art supply store. Now he made a purchase in a tobacco store and he stopped and looked in the windows of that glass and mirror store.

"He still has the documents and he's making very certain he isn't being followed."

The other man sighed. "Have it your own way," he said, a little wearily. "I'm sure you know what

you're doing, which is more than I do."

Twenty minutes later, the spy entered a liquor store, emerged quickly and stopped to light a cigarette in front of a bakery.

Pond picked up the radiophone. "All agents. Close in on liquor store at eleven twenty D'Arcy Street. Do it quietly and good luck." To Traver he gave a curt nod. "Now we take him."

The other man in the car scratched his head.

"All right, John," he said. "I'm a dope. Give. "How are you so sure?"

John Pond grinned. "I don't usually give away trade secrets," he said. "But—well, our man made several false contacts, if you had noticed."

"Noticed, hell," his partner grunted. "I didn't see anything but a lot of running around."

John Pond said patiently, "Use your eyes, man! Our boy came out of several places and in each case he looked in the windows to see if anyone was following him. Both times, the windows had mirrors so he could study any hankypanky behind him. The bakery did not, so when he came out of the liquor store and didn't pick out a window which had a mirror, he was no longer afraid of being caught. He had nothing more to worry about, because he had got rid of the documents. He was our man! And this was the time to nab him!"

Meet LITTLE SISTER



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